BACK BRAIN RECLUSE

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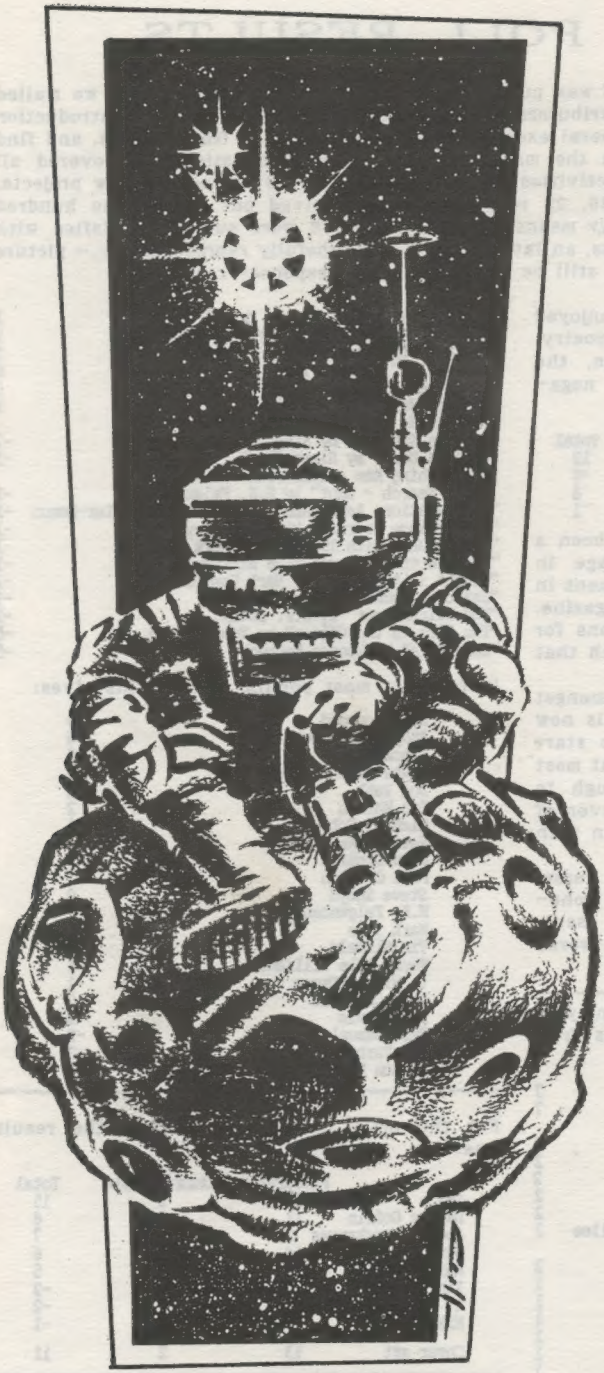

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READERS POLL RESULTS

When issue #11 of *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE* was published at the end of September 1988, we mailed out a Readers Poll to all subscribers, contributors and collaborators. Together with the introduction of a Letters page, this was part of a general exercise to increase feedback from readers, and find out more about what they wanted from the magazine. The 14 point questionnaire covered all aspects of the magazine's contents and activities, from likes and dislikes to possible new projects.

Between September 1988 and May 1989, 22 responses were received out of the one hundred questionnaires mailed out. That *hopefully* means that the other 78 were suitably satisfied with the magazine as it stood then. Nonetheless, an interesting - and hopefully representative - picture of the opinions of you, the readers, can still be drawn from the responses received.

Regarding which aspects of *BBR* readers enjoyed most / did not enjoy - the stories, the poetry, the illustrations, or the review section, the results were as follows (subtracting the negative mentions from the positive ones):

	Favourable	Unfavourable	Total
Stories	19	0	19
Poetry	5	13	-8
Illustrations	10	2	8
Reviews	4	3	1

The dropping of poetry from *BBR* has been a contentious subject on the Letters page in recent issues, with some vociferous argument in favour of retaining poetry in the magazine. However, of the thirteen negative mentions for poetry, twelve were the *only* aspect which that reader found unfavourable.

(Dave Hughes and John Haines, amongst others, have been lamenting that there is now one magazine less (out of very few to start with) publishing sf poetry: the fact is that most of the poetry which I found good enough to publish was really mainstream, and not even sf or sf-oriented, and didn't therefore fit in with what *BBR* is now essentially about.

There *is* still poetry in *BBR*, but not in verse: check out Hakim Bey's "Moonpiece: The Monologues", commencing on page 36 of this issue, one of the most poetic and image-laden works that has ever been submitted to *BBR*.)

For the stories which were most / least enjoyed, again subtracting the negative mentions from the positive ones:

"Dream the Real" by Simon Clark	7
"The Technophobe" by Lyle Hopwood	7
"Invisible City / Underground Music" by Andy Darlington	3
"Sensonomicon" by Lyle Hopwood	2
"La Fin de Bon-Bon" by Ian Watson	2
"The Idol in the Office" by Tom Farhman	2
"Junk" by Don Webb	2
"The Penultimate Horror Story" by Wayne Allen Sallee	2
"The Great Counterfeit Memory Sin-Drome" by Andy Darlington	2
"The Recondite Rebus" by Michael Cobley	1
"The Employee" by Paul O'Brien	1
"Taken for a Ride" by Steve Sneyd	1
"The Grin" by Wayne Allen Sallee	1
"The Art of Attention" by Don Webb	1
"Ground Control" by Wayne Allen Sallee	1
"The Star Wizard" by Kevin McNeil Kelly	1
"A Plague of Possession" by Andy Darlington	1
"Music to the Ears" by John Light	1
"The Yellow" by Mark Iles	0
"On Payment of Due Ransom" by Steve Sneyd	0
"Cathode Waltz" by Tim Nickels	-1
"... Beside the Seaside, Beside the Sea ..." by Simon Clark	-1
"Godde's Hand" by Simon Clark	-1
"Boy Pushing Man - Wonderous - Search - Shut" by H.R. Felgenhauer	-1
"Consummation, Ashes and Rebirth" by t. Winter-Damon	-1
"The Package Tourist" by Steve Sneyd	-1
"The Trouble with Theasus" by Mark Iles	-1
"Necrofetti" by Wayne Rile Williams	-1
"Caught in the Rain" by Mark Samuels	-2
"Sexscore Games" by Dave Cunliffe	-2
"The Weirdmonger" by D.F. Lewis	-2
"The Idol in the Office" by Tom Farhman	-5
"Checkmate" by Benson Herbert	-5

In terms of most popular writer, this gives:

Lyle Hopwood	9
Andy Darlington	6
Simon Clark	5
Wayne Allen Sallee	4
Don Webb	3
Ian Watson	2
Michael Cobley	1
Kevin McNeil Kelly	1
John Light	1
Paul O'Brien	1
Steve Sneyd	0
H.R. Felgenhauer	-1
Mark Iles	-1
Tim Nickels	-1
Wayne Rile Williams	-1
t. Winter-Damon	-1
Dave Cunliffe	-2
D.F. Lewis	-2
Mark Samuels	-2
Tom Farhman	-3
Benson Herbert	-5

For the artist popularity ranking, the result was:

	Favourable	Unfavourable	Total
SMS	17	2	15
Dallas Goffin	11	3	8
Jouni Waarakangas	8	1	7
Matt Brooker	14	8	6
Kaiser Bill	9	4	5
Ian Brooks	1	3	-2
t. Winter-Damon	1	3	-2
Mike Cobley	-	1	-1
Cover art	13	2	11

When asked what they would like to see included or discarded in *BBR*, a lot of readers seemed keen for the magazine to remain the way it is. "The magazine is excellent as it is – but try not to lose that essential 'spark' or 'magic' as you become more successful," wrote Tim Nickels, whilst Stephen Blyth said: "Nothing specifically, but please try and keep fiction from all the sub-genres included in the magazine. Some people, myself included, like all different types, e.g. New Wave, Sword'n'Sorcery, Comedy and Horror, etc."

M. Bould wants to see full page illustrations discarded from the magazine: "Your format is too small for an 'original fiction and art' showcase – one of the lessons *Interzone* has finally learned. Be a magazine of fiction foremost and use the artwork more skilfully to break the text up, as in 'Mirror Mirror on the Wall'."

Stephen Aylett, on the other hand, buys the magazine "mainly for the look of it and the artwork".

Some suggestions, such as the Letters page and the potted biographies of the contributing authors, have already been implemented. Another request has been for a subscription expiry reminder to go on the envelope, and you'll find details of the new system in the side panel on this page.

Richmond Hunt complained about the number of adverts for American magazines: "They only tantalise me, and it's so much effort to take out an International Money Draft – better I don't know about them." In response to this and other similar comments, *BBR* is now investigating becoming a UK agent for the more popular Stateside magazines – see the panel on page 51 for full details.

The *BBR* projects which have been most interesting so far:

The Best of Back Brain Recluse	11
Back issues	9
Notelets	8
Christmas cards	5
T-shirts	5

Possible future *BBR* projects:

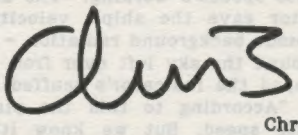
Collections by individual authors	12
Postcards	8
Posters	7
Other	4

Plans are already afoot to follow up these suggestions: a set of four postcards featuring artwork by Dallas Goffin is being launched with this issue (see page 2 or the *BBR* catalogue); and the Simon Clark collection will be available in the autumn (advance subscription details will be announced in the next issue of *BBR.)*

Other suggestions for *BBR* projects included button badges, audio cassettes (in the pipeline) and theme issues. Matthew Dickens wanted to see *BBR* go bi-monthly, together with the creation of a sister magazine. Neither of which are feasible in the immediate future, but in the meantime, the nearest *BBR* has to a sister magazine is *Works*, edited by Dave Hughes and Andy Stewart down the road in Huddersfield.

The average age of those who responded to the Readers Poll was 27½ years; all were male. In September 1988, when the Poll was mailed out, only 7 of the 95 (7%) subscribers were female. However, it is most encouraging to see that with the publication of this issue in May 1989, that figure has risen to 19 out of 146 (13%). There is no reason why more women should not be involved in reading and writing sf and fantasy, and *BBR* has an open policy of making the small press readily available to as wide a public as is humanly possible. We would like to see more female contributors as well, and hope that more women will soon be joining Lyle Hopwood at the head of our popularity table.

My thanks to all those who responded to the Readers Poll, and to those who have written in with their comments and ideas since the Letters page was introduced. The next Poll will take place with issue #15, but you don't have to wait until then to write and tell us what you think of *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE* magazine. We look forward to hearing from you!



Chris Reed.

NEW MAILING LABEL SYSTEM

Readers who receive *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE* through the post can now check their subscription status from the mailing label.

In the bottom right hand corner of the label appears the issue number with which your subscription expires, so if it says "13" then please make sure you renew promptly!

THE SPACE BUTTERFLIES

S.M. Baxter

I felt the familiar lurch as the ship dropped out of hyperspace.

I looked up from my instrument console. Captain Fairbrother was striking a pose, shoulders back, hands clasped. I peered past him to the viewscreen –

My jaw dropped. The planet was beautiful.

A dozen Earths could have been laced around its black equator. Huge towers pierced the atmosphere, and giant cities sparkled in the light –

What light?

It sailed through space alone, far from any star. But the layer of space around it seemed to churn as if stirred by a ladle. Gradually I made out details, and I realised that vast ships were sailing around the planet, like butterflies with wings a thousand miles wide. The reflective wings gathered up the starlight and splashed it over the cities ...

"Let's have a status report, Mr Soper," said Fairbrother.

I glared at his broad back. "I don't think the absolute speedo's working." The absolute speed indicator gave the ship's velocity relative to the cosmic background radiation – the dull glow all around the sky left over from the Big Bang. I thumped the indicator's scuffed surface to no avail. "According to this the planet's got no absolute speed. But we know it's moving at several hundred kilometres a second ..."

Fairbrother's turret of a head swivelled round towards me. "Don't bring me problems, Mr Soper. I want solutions."

I thumped the speedo again. "Fairbrother, for Christ's sake why don't you drop this 'captain and his loyal crew' garbage?

"This isn't a ship of the line. It's an underfunded exploration barge. You've been pensioned out of the navy. And there's only the two of us on the whole damn ship!"

Fairbrother's eyes were wide apart and seemed to target me individually. "Mr Soper!" he thundered.

Our wills locked. The moment stretched. I tried to remember that the whole point of me signing up on this voyage had been to leave my personal weaknesses behind me on Earth. To do more than the nine-to-five routine at the bank – to escape the mess my life had become ...

Had I gained nothing? Was I going to let myself be dominated by a pompous old man?

You bet I was. I dropped my eyes and began the speedo's test routine.

I'd travelled light years and got nowhere, I thought gloomily. My faults encased me like a spacesuit. Motion was an illusion –

I snapped out of my introspection.

I checked the speedo again. "Fairbrother, I think the speedo's working after all. It's just that the planet really is stationary."

He frowned. "But we know it's got a velocity of several hundred klicks –"

"In the galactic frame, yes – but the galaxy's moving against the cosmic background. You didn't know that? So are all the nearby galaxies; they're streaming through space like a flock of starry geese."

His magnificent face crumpled with the effort of accepting a new idea. He searched for words. "Why?" he managed.

"Nobody knows. But the point is this planet's motion is an illusion; the galaxy is moving past it."

Fairbrother's eyes flickered skyward. "So useful," he said drily. He sat in his control chair. "We'll make for the head of one of those towers."

We crept into the flock of butterflies. Their wings flapped over us, edged with starlight; scaled against Earth's moon they would have looked like moths beating against a light bulb.

The tower was a hollow spire reaching out of the atmosphere. "Look at that." I pointed "They use the towers to launch the winged things."

A cylinder like a chrysalis squirted up and out of the tower; its shell cracked and tumbled away and magnificent wings began to unfurl. Other butterflies clustered around like parents, bathing the newcomer with focussed starlight.

Damp-looking wings clutched at the light. "They're using radiation pressure to help it reach orbital velocity," I breathed. "Fantastic –"

Fairbrother took us nosing through the crowd; the mature butterflies scattered nimbly but the 'baby' couldn't get out of the way. We made straight for it. Fairbrother extended the grappling arm.

I stared, horrified. "What are you doing?"

He didn't answer. With clinical skill he snipped away the glistening wings. Then he grabbed the helpless central section and began to draw it into the ship.

Fragments of the wings drifted away, crumpling. Mature butterflies sailed around us, agitated. "Fairbrother, that's brutal."

"Do you want to do an analysis of this thing, Mr Soper?"

I went to my console. But I thumped the keyboard pretty hard. Impressive, huh?

Fairbrother brought the butterfly remnant into a lab bay. The monitor showed a clear globe ten feet wide. Inside a moth-like creature thrashed.

It was human-shaped but smoothed out and stretched, a sculpture in hot plastic. It had wings of its own; they were silvery and threw highlights at us in tantalising hints of pattern.

It had no mouth. Long fingers worked control threads which led to the forlorn stumps of butterfly wings.

Fairbrother snorted contemptuously. "How primitive."

I watched the wings. "I don't know," I said. "There seems to be a purpose to those reflections. Suppose that's how it communicates?"

There was a lot of fast-moving detail. "It must be equivalent to thousands of words a minute. That's a lot of information, Fairbrother –"

He shrugged. "So what? It couldn't even defend itself."

"Damn it, military will isn't the only measure of intelligence! How could these creatures have developed spaceflight without a high civilisation?"

He smiled. "On Earth, there's a spider which builds diving bells out of its webbing. Blind evolution."

I tried to find the words to shut him up, and failed.

A laser scalpel lanced across the bay and slit open the moth creature's life sac. The delicate wings thrashed in a visual scream as precious gases rushed out.

"Fairbrother, you're such a bastard."

"Hm. Interesting mix of trace elements. Almost breathable."

Then he turned his back on the dying alien

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and moved back to his control chair.

I worked frantically, pumping the lab full of a gas mixture. But the alien had crumpled like waste paper and barely twitched.

I felt like climbing in there with it.

The ship plunged towards the atmosphere. Fairbrother hummed as he worked.

We slid over great cities.

A launch tower thrust like a giant's fist from the heart of each city. We sailed over a monstrous well; at its bottom was a ruddy glow. "Geothermal energy," I said. "The source of their power."

"I'm making for what looks like the busiest region," said Fairbrother. Ahead of us, hundreds of butterflies pierced the dusty air with starlight beams.

Something shouldered its way over the horizon: a pyramid jet-black, miles tall and geometrically perfect. Moth creatures swooped over its three faces like flies on the flank of an elephant.

Fairbrother nodded, his hawk eyes unblinking. "Except for the launch towers, the largest structure on the planet. Obviously of religious significance; some kind of temple."

I hesitated. "Well ... I'm not so sure. We don't know anything about this place."

"We'll land here," my captain decided. "We want to have the maximum impact."

"Impact? We're supposed to be scientists, not bloody conquistadors."

But it was too late. Fairbrother set us down hard at the foot of the pyramid; I watched aliens squirm out of the way. I don't think they all made it.

"Suit up," said Fairbrother.

"What?"

"Suit up." He started assembling his equipment.

"What kind of expedition is this?" I grumbled. "Shouldn't we fill out the standard reports first?"

I suited up.

Fairbrother strutted onto the surface of the planet.

The pyramid dominated a vast plain littered with moths. The thick air of this huge but light planet was full of them – not truly flying, they glided on their stubby wings, a bit like flying fish.

Their mouthless silence was eerie.

Space butterflies flew over the deep sky, sparkling sheets the size of my hand. They looked like a flock of bony suns.

Fairbrother strode towards the pyramid as if he owned it.

The ship was ringed by curious – or fearful – moths. They parted to let Fairbrother through. Beside their starlit grace he looked absurd in his suit, a lump of clay. "Follow me, Mr Soper," he ordered. "They can obviously do us no harm."

I stumbled out of the ship. "Where are you going? What about the atmospheric monitors – the cultural exchange packages –"

He didn't answer. He towered over the aliens; he walked through them like a hero. After their initial fright, or confusion, they seemed excited by the novelty of it all. They clustered around him like faery children, chattering bits of starlight to each other.

In my arms I bore the collection of flimsy rags that was all we'd left of the butterfly pilot. I walked hesitantly towards the nearest moths. "Here," I said, holding out my burden. "I'm sorry. Perhaps you can do something for him."

A dozen smoothed-over faces peered into mine for a frozen moment. Then they broke into a flurry of glittering wings and fluttered over the casualty.

They definitely seemed to be communicating with their wings, I thought with a part of my mind. Another part made me turn away in shame.

I set off after Captain Fairbrother.

I reached the base of the pyramid and started to climb. The surface was almost sheer but there was plenty of traction; I climbed with easy bounds in the toy gravity.

I joined a lane of moths scrambling up the pyramid. Another lane hurried down from the summit, squeezing around us –

One of the down stream fell before me.

Startled, I stumbled and landed on my butt.

Aliens swarmed around us as if directed by a traffic cop. Their wings rippled with concentric circles. Laughter? Embarrassed, I got to my feet.

I stood over the fallen creature. Its slender body trembled and patterns chased each other over its wings, growing ever finer as if focussing. Finally with an audible click the patterns froze over a small area at the heart of each wing.

Carefully the moth poked its fine fingers through the fabric of its wings and tore out the patterned areas. There didn't seem to be any pain and the wings started healing immediately. With monkish care the moth rolled up the torn-off pieces and pushed them into fine slots in the side of the pyramid.

Then it got to its spidery feet and hurried off down the slope. I watched it go, bemused.

It was as if the moth had brought some sort

of knowledge from the pyramid's summit and had now extruded it from its body.

I knelt awkwardly. The looming face of the pyramid was covered with slots, each stuffed with a wing-fabric scroll.

This whole structure must be a sort of library, stuffed with knowledge. Could the planet and its people have been redesigned – dedicated to a single purpose, like a vast monastery?

The pieces of the puzzle soared around my mind like the space butterflies.

The planet was stiller than the galaxies, far from the obscuring light of any star. Spaceborne mirrors sailed around it – mirrors big enough to see clear back to the Big Bang. And the very bodies of the little inhabitants had been adapted to serve as recording instruments ...

I remembered Fairbrother.

He was so far ahead I could only see the wake he left in the stream of moths. I hurried on.

"Fairbrother! Captain Fairbrother! We've got to talk about this!"

"This place is obviously some sort of temple," he transmitted calmly. "We seem to have arrived during a religious festival."

"Fairbrother, you're crazy. Listen to me –"

"We should seize the moment. Take the opportunity." His voice glinted with self-confidence.

"You've been planning this since you found out how physically weak these creatures are, haven't you?" I panted desperately. "You think you can lord it over the planet."

He laughed at me and stalked on.

I raged at my weakness and tried to run after him. But the more I hurried the more I stumbled, scared of crushing fragile limbs beneath my feet.

I battled through the insubstantial obstructions: the aliens, and – still more nebulous – my own inadequacies.

"Fairbrother, you're totally wrong about what's happening here. Use your eyes! You haven't stopped to think since we landed.

"This pyramid is the centrepiece of the planet. But it's not a temple. It's a library! Look under your feet, damn it. It's stuffed with a million generations' worth of recordings."

Fairbrother was nearing the summit. "Recordings?" he asked absently.

"Face it, Fairbrother. You want to believe you will be treated as a hero here, as a god. Like Cortés, like the conquistadors. That way no-one on earth will treat you like a loser any more. Isn't that it?"

"Shut your mouth, Soper."

"No!"

I saw him reach the summit of the pyramid. The quality of light changed. The space butterflies sailed into a new formation; their spotlights swooped towards the pyramid, leaving the land bathed in darkness.

Towards the summit the moths were arranging themselves into a formal array. And at the summit itself –

I groaned. "I don't believe it. A throne! There had to be."

Fairbrother squared his shoulders.

"Fairbrother, for the last time –

"This whole damn planet's an astronomical observatory. The sky's littered with enormous spaceborne mirrors.

"And these aliens aren't savages. They're not priests – or princes. They're astronomers!" I gestured at the aliens caked over the summit in their patient ranks. "Their whole bodies are recording instruments – they take notes on pieces of their wings."

A scared-looking moth creature sat in the throne, hopelessly fluttering its wings at Fairbrother. Two others stood to either side, holding a sort of elaborate crown. "You may as well shut your mouth, Mr Soper," Fairbrother said reasonably, "because I'm not listening."

He stepped forward and majestically took the silvered crown from the two attendants. They fluttered in protest. Fairbrother reached forward and brushed the third moth from the throne.

"You think that's some sort of king! Wrong! He's a – a – an Astronomer Royal! That's all!"

Fairbrother sat in the throne; it seemed to creak under his weight. He held the crown over his head and surveyed his kingdom, savouring the moment.

Space butterflies in all parts of the sky sent needle beams of concentrated starlight sweeping down at the pyramid. Great rings of light rushed towards Fairbrother. He was at the focus of the planet.

Literally.

"Don't do it, Fairbrother! I'm pleading with you." A rustling crowd still separated us; I struggled forward, trying to force power into my voice. "The bodies of these aliens have been adapted as – as telescope eyepieces. Yours hasn't! You don't know what you're doing – you'll kill yourself ..."

Fairbrother lowered the crown. It balanced precariously on his helmet.

The light roared in on him –

– and the crown exploded into brilliance, became a bit of starlight.

Fairbrother's head was a ball of flame. He screamed. He slumped from the throne.

The crown fell off and rolled away. The moment of focus passed and the brilliance died.

My eyes watering, I staggered forward. "Fairbrother! Fairbrother ..."

When I reached him, he was getting to his feet. He said hoarsely: "My suit saved me." He swayed.

I gaped.

The plastic of his helmet had blistered into a monstrous balloon. Fire-extinguishing foam had oozed from his suit's pores and hardened over him in great bulges. He had a belly like an elephant's.

From above huge foam cheeks his gimlet eyes fixed me. "What's the matter with you?"

I bowed solemnly. "Your majesty."

The light flickered. The pyramid was covered with moths staring up at us. And the wings of every one of them were covered with flowing concentric circles.

Fairbrother's inflated helmet wobbled uncertainly. "What are they doing?"

"They're laughing," I said harshly. "They're laughing at you. All of them.

"And so am I. Your majesty."

He stared at me – and then at the ranks of aliens –

– and in that moment something went out of him, a spirit almost visible. What was left was nothing but a sad old man.

Awkwardly, I took his arm. "Come on," I said. "Let's forget this and get on with our work."

I began to guide him down the pyramid. He crunched as he walked and left behind a trail of foam.

"But I'll tell you this," I said roughly. "I won't be calling you 'captain' again."

The ridiculous head drooped further. Suddenly I felt a lot bigger inside.

"Or maybe I will. What the hell."

I led him through the alien throng to our ship.

THE END

Steven Baxter is 31, and lives in High Wycombe, Bucks, with his wife, Sandra. He works in London as a computer systems analyst. He started writing sf as a teenager, but nothing too successful until *Interzone* accepted a story called "The Xeelee Flower", published in 1987. Since then he's had three other pieces accepted by *IZ*, won a *Jennings* magazine story contest, and won second place in a "Writers of the Future" contest in the USA. This is his first appearance in *BBR*.

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DUET FOR THE DEVIL

Randy Chandler & t. Winter - Damon

I

POV: PAN IN TIGHT: SHARPEN FOCUS (x 1):

Interior of office suite. Luxurious appointments. Motifs in eclectic mix of Sino-Nipponese. Hand scrolls of sparse brush strokes. Writhing forms of soapstone carvings & polished curves of porcelain sprout everywhere. Translucent window/wall of outward-mirrored glass, overlooking kinetic anthill of Hong Kong harbour ...

COLOUR OUT OF SYNC:

No red. No gold. No black. Window's tinted inner surface bleeding a wash of fluid ultramarine, shifting subtly, suggesting systaltic rhythmings of veins or deepsea grotto's tidal pulse. All within peripherals bone white or blue - phasing from midnight shade to palest shimmerings of sky ...

POV: TIGHTEN FIELD: SCAN INTERIOR ON MAGNIFICATION (x 15):

Details of figurals a riot of Tao-gone-madhouse ... Yin & Yang bizarreries inverting/subverting/perverting spiritflow into demonic twists of torment ... beasts both mythical & representative coupling dementedly with intertwining humans running the gamut of age & physique & sex ... *suckling babes/sumos/& toothless hags* ... ritual sacrifice gone *snuff* ...

POV: DILATE FIELD: TRACK TO ROOM CENTRE: ROTATE OPTIC FULL AXIS (x 5):

Lone man sits at desk. Staring at (unseen) object on desktop ... Tall, fragile, almost skeletal in stature ... Whites of eyes, yellowed, scrimshawed with webwork of bloody veins ... Irises seemingly dissolved in black pools of pupil ... Oriental ... Characteristic epicanthic folds & facial bone structure ... Old. Wrinkled as a salted prune ... Perhaps even *ancient* ...? Forked beard & trailing mustache, midriff-length, whispish as a catfish's whiskers, white as winter snow on rushes ...

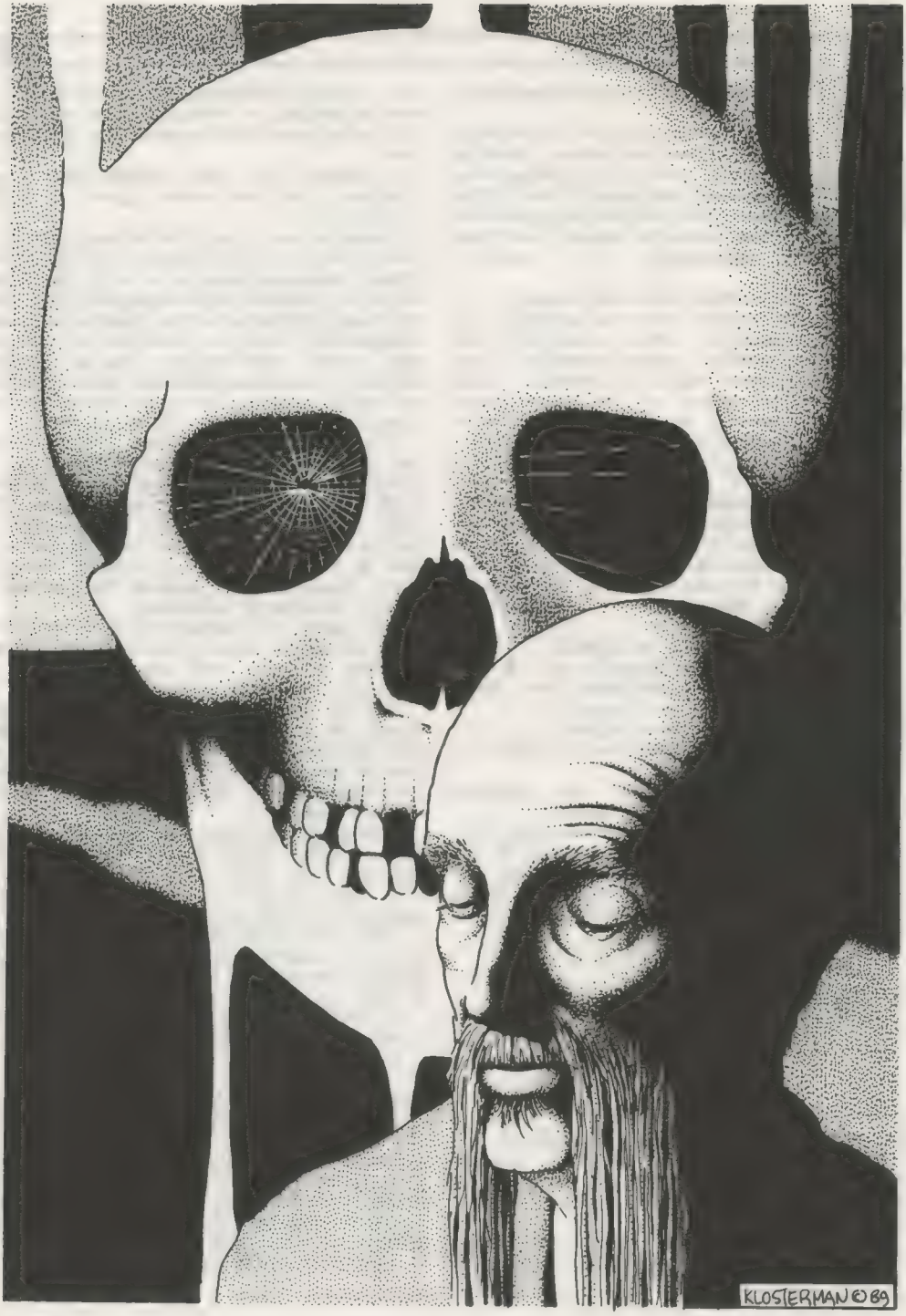
Man (he is known as *"Lotan"* to his followers ...) sucks occasionally on long slender pipe, scrimshawed intricately as his eyeballs, frenzied danse macabre swirls across its surface ... thin, pallid lips like waterlogged wound suckle at its stem ... smoke drifts in phantom arabesques, coiling & writhing, serpentlike ...

Desk pedestal of ivory (?) bone (?) intricately carved as a five-clawed *fu-ts'ang lung wang* (imperial sigil dragon guard of vast wealth hidden in waters' depths). Desktop of cobalt blue glass.

Scythe-like nails tip bony fingers, cradle polished human skull resting on table's surface ... An *artifact* of incalculable rarity & value ... of *inhuman evil:* rumoured cranium of the notorious Gilles de Rais, 15th century baron, Marshall of France, & child-murderer extraordinaire ...

POV: TIGHTEN FIELD: CLOSE-UP: MAGNIFICATION (x 25):

The hollow sockets of the eyeholes taunt the jaded libido as might a peepshow screen ... a


KLOSTERMAN ©89

hologram-like image fills the deathshead with pseudolife:

A battlefield at the edge of the world where a blooodmoon looms over the chaotic clash of opposing armies & the screams of fallen soldiers are hymns to the merciless gods of war - This is the place where hell invades earth, marked by human spillings exploding entrails sacrificial cannonfodder smouldering gore headless torsos ...

The sky above them boils with storm ...

& the line wavers, ever so slightly, yet indeed noticeable to those observers who witness in eternal vigil, standing their appointed watches with a devotion that transcends that which is commonly termed "religious" - bearing witness to those revelations that transpire within the grander scheme of life & death & ...

The plain of (Ragnarok) Vigridr (?) (Armageddon) Megiddo (?) Neon Babylon ...

The plane of nahui-ollin's *catastrophe* (?), *when the fifth sun is swallowed by the rift of shifting earth, when the great dark releases the* tzitzimime *from the white house of the west ... slaying all of human kind ... to begin the world's next cycle ...*

& the line wavers, ever so slightly ...

The armies of Surtr & Muspell's Sons & Loki & the Sons of Hel & Hrymr with Frost Giant Legions & Fenris Wolf press forward ...

& the line wavers, ever so slightly ...

The armies of the Antichrist press forward ...

& the line wavers ...

The armies of tzitzimime, *the skeleton monsters, the undead press forward ...*

The time of Nidhoggr (?) *... of the beast that rises from the sea, with seven heads & ten horns, & upon his horns ten crowns, & upon his heads the name of blasphemy* (?) *... of Leviathan* (?) *... of Tiamat* (?) *... of Quetzalcoatl* (?) *...*

& the line wavers ... DISSOLVE to:

POV: DILATE FIELD (x 5):

& the scythe-like nails & the bony fingers of Lotan tremble with excitement ... DISSOLVE to:

II

POV: PAN IN TIGHT: SHARPEN FOCUS (x 1):

Interior of office suite. Lotan's sanctum sanctorum. The old man's red-webworked eyes still stare into the hollow eye sockets of the skull ...

An area of wall at his extreme left swings outward. Silently. The brush-stroke painting of "Four Maidens Ravished by Bull & Dogs" is a sick masterpiece of twisted Taoist erotica ... & a cleverly concealed doorway into an adjacent room

(or perhaps into some twilight-blue zone of interface with the opened gates of a very special Hell ...)

A man enters through the doorway. If he is a man at all (?) He is a brawny giant with huge, corded, muscular arms, & a belly like a wine barrel of blubbery flesh overspilling the top of his white loin cloth, & great pendulous slabs of breasts that wobble as he moves, the gold rings that pierce their nipples jiggling, catching flashes of the ultramarine blue ambient light on the tight, polished curve of metal. Glinting. Sparking. With an eerie, deathcold fire ...

If he was once truly human, the resemblance has long since been *transformed* into the horribly mutilated mask of a leering demon. A BLUE DEMON: his skin is deathly cyanic blue. Gold rings pierce his lips, his nostrils, his cheeks, his eyelids, & even his tongue. & his face is a slashed ruin of tattered meat that would shame a hun's scarred features as the angelic features of a choirboy ...

"The boyth are reathy for you, Mathter." The giant announces, bowing steeply in reverence as he does so. The rings pierced through his tongue & lips jingle as he speaks.

The old man draws himself up like a praying mantis on his spindly, almost-insectlike legs. The illusion is further suggested by the way that he holds his hands folded before his chest, his fingers lethal claws despite all of their seeming fragility ...

"I shall do you honour, O Venerable Head of Bone -" Lotan speaks whisperingly to the skull upon the table as he rises.

He tips his head & torso ever so slightly, bowing to it with undisguised reverence ...

"This time, Hsuan Chieh, with *delicate* strokes, create a masterpiece of subtle & lingering beauty - make their exquisite songs of torment & death an infinity for my enlightenment ..."

He shuffles toward the opened threshold with mincing, crippled-insect steps.

He enters the door.

POV: PAN IN TIGHT: SHARPEN FOCUS (x 1):

Interior of room. No doors. No windows. That the eye can discern. All four walls & floor & ceiling padded. Fitted with the finest acoustics that technology can supply & *money* can obtain. Sound *whispers* here, as if in reverence or terror, sucked greedily into the unremitting expanse of dead-white muffling surface. The air is cool & sterile & hermetic, tinged with the

apprehensive scent of alcohol & antiseptic, keying memories of doctors' offices & surgeons' operating rooms. Ceiling-recessed lamps spill a flood of ultramarine illumination down upon its occupants. & the fitting of a secret abattoir:

POV: TIGHTEN FIELD: SCAN INTERIOR ON MAGNIFICATION (x 5):

A throne of bonewhite marble overlooks the remainder of the room. Its gracefully towering structure is alive with the sculptured forms of naked, writhing, shrieking cherubim.

A long, narrow table of tubular stainless steel & cobalt blue glass stands just before the throne – parallel, & spanning halfway across the room's width. Its dark blue surface glitters with a profusion of scalpels & bone-saws & tongs & exploratory probes, all of lovingly polished surgical steel. Glistening strands of barbed wire. & there are whips & flails of every conceivable configuration – thonged & handled all of glossy midnight black.

At either extreme of the table are situated dentists' chairs, perpendicular to the throne, & bristling with the spiderleg array of drills & bits & curved mirrors that is bright with the promise of potential pain. Echoed in the soft, supple black leather of their upholstering ...

But in the centre of the room. *Ooohhh! Merciful Jesus! If there were divine mercy in this world, surely no such abomination could exist!* But there is no mercy here, in the centre of this Hell on Earth. There is only pain & blasphemy & terror. There is only *the Palette of the Perverse* – a vaguely heart-shaped trough with a raised lip some several inches deep, its diameter perhaps eighteen feet at the broadest spot, wide enough to accommodate the cluster of meat-hooks & gaffs & chain-&-pulley rigs sprouting from the ceiling above ...

... & a large drain hole in the trough's bottom, near centre of the right "lobe" of the "heart" – just where the artist's thumb would be inserted, were this the mundane, far smaller palette of convention ...

But this is the palette of the savaged flesh & senses, not some mere board from which the simple pigments are selected!

Lotan admires the raw stock from which his servant, Hsuan Chieh, will strive to create his masterpiece of "subtle & lingering beauty".

& in the background, against the farthest wall, rise tier-upon-tier of glass shelves lined with hundreds (?) of small, fragile, carefully cleaned-&-polished skulls –

Nameless memories of Lotan's slaughtered innocents ...

DISSOLVE TO:

A field of blue writhing through a spectrum of unnatural variety: of every conceivable hue that the human mind has identified & catalogued & labeled with a name, of shades & tones & resonations that have no name in any spoken language ...

A FLICKERING BLUE EXTREME ...

THE END

The above is an excerpt from a forthcoming and potentially controversial novel of the same title by Randy Chandler & t. Winter-Damon, & hopefully hints at some of the more unusual elements of structure, content & style aimed for within the work. *Duet for the Devil* is the first volume of a macabre trilogy that will form the *Books of the Beast*, a collection that strives to break through the established limits of Splatterpunk & Anti-Horror into a new realm that Damon has jokingly termed 'Neo-Baudelairian Cyber-Sade'.

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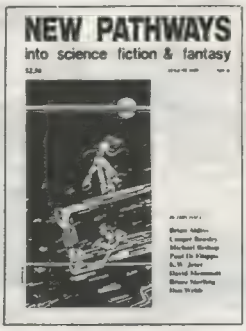

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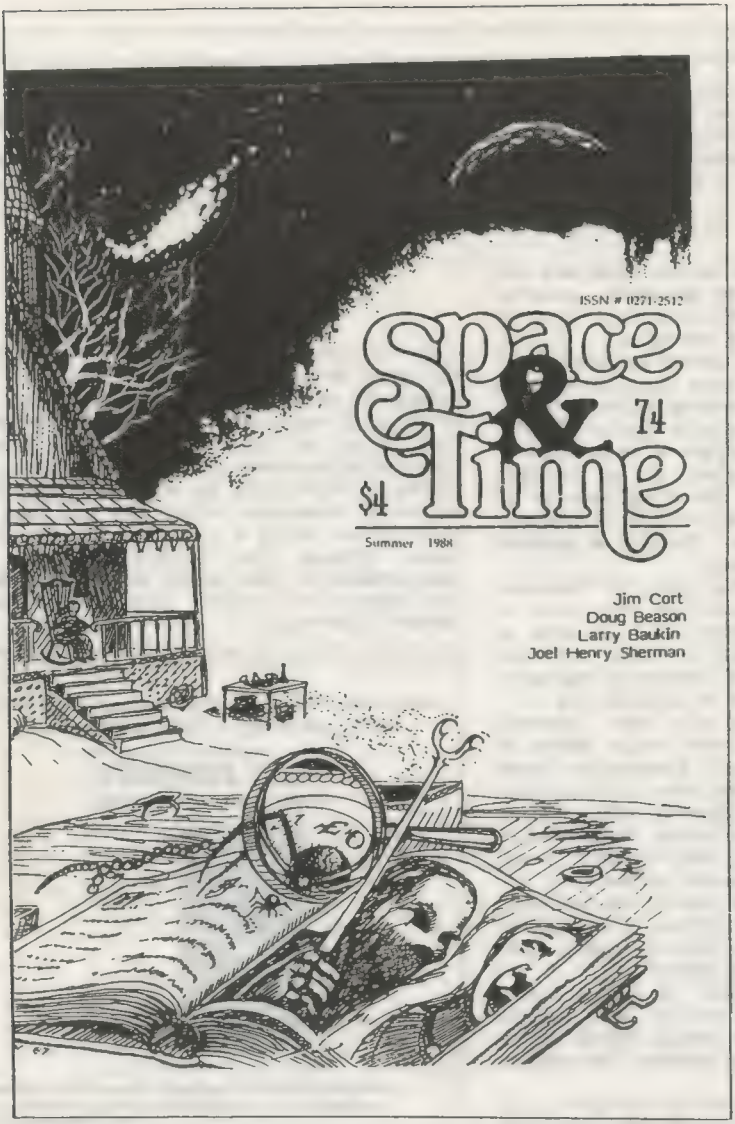

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DREAM SEQUENCE

Dave W. Hughes

A small screen flickered into life as Simpson placed the last of the brain cells onto the feeder plate. The green haze from the monitor cast surreal shadows around the dismal room. He studied hard as the retention period flashed on and off in a window at the corner of the screen – six hours! Then the cells would be as dead as the person they came from.

Simpson had been working to remove the embedded images from the cells and get them on disc before the retention period elapsed. When the cell initialised, he'd been faced with twenty nine retractable image sequences retained by Sara's brain – he'd gone through thirteen so far. He pressed a key and down onto the screen fell a menu:

1. *Biography (known as correct to within seven days*
2. *Image sequences – Total 29*
3. *Stored sequences – 13 retained.*

For a distraction, he pressed the *Biography* section, rubbing his eyes as the figures disappeared and new ones reappeared.

CODE PATTERN RECOGNISED ...
23 YEAR OLD FEMALE ... SARA WILSON ...
SECTOR 345/121/12 ... ASSISTANT DEPUTY CLERK FOR STATE ACCOUNTS ... JOB NUMBER 24/24/209.
INSTITUTIONAL ADJUSTMENTS ... NIL
IMMUNISATION RECORD ... FULL COURSE.

It went on to list her awards and achievements; her two year tenure at the University of Gladstone, Sector 14/87/6. Why had she committed suicide? He wasn't really being paid to answer that question – all he had to do was verify that suicide had taken place.

Waiting at the machine for his coffee, he pressed the stiffness out of his back then sat back at the console. He sipped the warm liquid and returned to the main menu – the three options faced him again. He knew there were perhaps a couple of relevant images in the cells, but he'd have to sort through all the others to find the reason why. Strangely, there was never any record of the suicide's last few moments, like a section or image of the actual preparation for the act. The memories of that event must be very weak, the mind of the victim must already have given up.

Once the last image had been retrieved, he began to reflect on the case. The authorities were satisfied it wasn't murder, the pathologist had ruled out foul play, and just to satisfy any staunch disbelievers there was the suicide note.

Everyone had obviously heard of the case – it was blasted out on all the news frequencies and, considering how unique the suicide was (there hadn't been one in that sector for over fifteen years) it barely retained the public's imagination for more than twelve hours; the disappearance of the Saturn mission saw to that.

Simpson had been hired by Wilson's mother, she just wanted to be sure. As cigarette smoke wound around the ceiling, Simpson called up a stored image ...

... flickering in the green mist, vague figures

coalesced and collided into one another ... rippling sounds, distorted somehow. It coughed from the speakers like a phlegmatic old man, the sounds trying to surface ... a child's party? When the sequencer levelled and synthesised itself onto the correct frequency of the cells, the images became clearer; the clumsiness of the figures stabilised. The music grabbed hold of the memory and told you its name – The Hoki Coki. A raven-haired, smiling child ran amongst other children, her hat tilted by excitement ...

... All the images of a happy childhood ... No clumsy, horrible phobias as yet, picked up like over-ripe cherries.

Simpson had received the call from Sara's mother, asking him to find out if Sara had committed suicide. Mrs Wilson had probably called on a strange and lonely kind of impulse – Simpson wasn't too bothered, as long as they paid. Perhaps, in a masochistic way, she just wanted confirmation that her daughter had insulted her parents in the worst possible way. Simpson could only guess. Sara had had everything, rich parents – her father was one of the wealthiest men in the sector. Her career had, to all intents, seemed steady – no problems.

Money had never been Sara's problem. Simpson wished it were the same for him. For Christ's sake – money would cure all his problems, stop him being a technical ghoul, a *Commscanner*.

COMMSCANNER: person hired to ascertain reasons for death. USU after normal channels have found nothing suspicious. Problems often begin to occur after approx ten hours when the Mapped Personality Neurons (MPN) begin to lose the chemical Uricidle Acid 14. A Commscanner is frowned upon by certain establishments – being regarded as a latter day graverobber or ghoul (see Burke and Hare p461 Disc 12).

Chambers and Oxford Encyclopedia.

He keyed the menu and tapped for another image – #14 ...

... chopped dialogue ... muggy word and muffled music ... a block of terrace houses ... mist ... Shining through the foggy darkness were three streetlamps, haloed by a grubby, dirty moon upon which clouds ripped apart. One house, number twenty one ... The eyes of the dead girl looked up towards the window directly above the door and watched as someone waved at her ... talking could be heard but, as always, sounded as though underwater ... the door opened and in she went ... spent bottles and full ashtrays dotted around the carpet like star clusters and in amongst them writhed several couples who were doing more than smoking and drinking ...

Simpson sat through a few more image viewings, but they all proved to be useless. Just vague and unpretentious images from a girl who had a very loving and caring family. The reasons weren't coming through at all.

It always annoyed Simpson that the images were never in order. No matter how the embedded images were extracted, they always came out in random order; so the last out wasn't always the last in. (He remembered back to the Bisley case, where the last image that came out had been a scene from a nature trek at junior school; Bisley had been over seventy years old!) Pushing the tiredness back towards his receding hairline, he keyed for the next image.

... smile ... bubble talk again ... suffused with blue and red ... flashing and popping sounds, probably distortion ... Smile again though up close this time ... image retained and holding ... the face looked familiar ... Simpson realises it's the person from the room window in the party scene ... The face keeps going in and out of focus ... the smile is beginning to look strained ... as though ...

Simpson felt embarrassed. His erection prodded into his thigh as though to remind him. He stopped the image and trashed it. Sex had never really bothered him in this capacity before, so why had he been aroused by witnessing Sara making love?

He switched off the console, set the alarm and lay back against his headboard. Surprisingly, he slept well, and his dreams, if indeed he had any, were the quiet sort. When he awoke he reached out for his alarm, and then realised that it was the phone.

"Yes, er hello?" He was still groggy. The person at the other end waited for ages, then the receiver clicked – gone. He sat up in his bed and walked over to the console and switched off the alarm properly. The phone again.

"Yes, hello. Simpson speaking."

"Hello, er is that the *Commscanner* Simpson?"

"'Fraid so. How can I help you?"

"You could drop the case of Sara Wilson, and tell her mother that you couldn't find out why she did it."

"I don't discuss clients' business over the phone. Pointless asking I know, but who am I speaking to?" As he guessed, the phone went dead. Simpson then began to think: Mrs Wilson hadn't asked for the *reason*, just confirmation that her daughter *had* committed suicide. This sudden quirk made Simpson eager, more than

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David L.
TRANSU
1989

ever, to now find out why. Someone out there didn't want the reasons made obvious.

The voice on the phone had been male, old male he guessed. Things were starting to get interesting. He delved into yet another image ... only this time he had renewed interest. Someone, somewhere, wanted Sara to rest under a veil of deception. Another image blared onto the screen ...

... picking up concrete walls washed with magenta paint ... this image was incredibly clear ... so clear that Simpson knew that although it wasn't the last in the sequence, it was one of the last things Sara had seen ... Lift doors opening ... closing ... lights, up, up, up ... out onto floor fifteen ... walking down towards door ... door? Too vague to see ... marches in and goes straight past secretary ... opens door and strides over to a veneered oak door ... a key from Sara's bag is brought adeptly up and inserted ... door flies open and on the couch a couple are screwing ... underwater language bubbles whilst the woman tries vainly to cover up her young body ... Sara turns and goes straight out the way she came ... As the main door of the office slams, the secretary opens it and Sara turns ... there is a name above the door ...

Simpson recognised Wilson's face when he came to the door. Wilson led him through to the study, and all the while he could see the trappings of rich people, very rich people.

"Why have you come here, Mr Simpson, when a letter would have sufficed?"

Simpson recognised the voice as well.

"I, er, I like to deliver the verdict, *and* the reasons, to the people genuinely concerned. I know how close Mrs Wilson was to Sara, I only thought it right that she should know that it was suicide. And if she asks I can also tell her why."

He waited and watched as Wilson squirmed. He tried several times to say something, but the timing had gone.

The door to Wilson's study opened and Mrs Wilson walked in. "Would you like some tea, Mr ...?"

"Simpson's the name, Mrs Wilson. Thank you I'd love one. I'm just going through the account with your husband now ..."

Wilson just squirmed and tried to smile, and waved a no to the offer of tea. As Mrs Wilson closed the door, he managed to compose himself. "What exactly have you managed to find out?"

"Let me start be telling you a few things, Mr Wilson. Firstly, Sara was under a mighty wrong impression up until the day she died. She thought that she'd got a couple of the closest parents that could be hoped for. Every image retrieved out of her, her ... memory, was laced with love and imagery from her parents. The very essence of Mom and Pop. You killed her, Wilson, you killed her by shattering her dreams and her love. She died for your pleasures, Wilson."

Simpson threw the report down onto Wilson's desk and turned to go. Just then the door to the study opened and he quickly altered his expression. Mrs Wilson frowned. "Aren't you stopping, Mr Simpson?"

"I must apologise, Mrs Wilson. In my haste I had forgotten about an important meeting later this evening. Sorry to have caused any trouble."

"Oh, there's been no trouble. I don't suppose you ...?"

"Yes, I almost forgot. I've left the report with your husband." And with that he left, hoping that his non-committal attitude would hide his seething anger.

Back in his office, Simpson began to disinfect the cell tray and the accompanying equipment. *She didn't even know,* he thought. *He was having it away with a bit of skirt, and his wife didn't know!* The phone rang.

"Yes, hello?"

"It's me, Wilson."

"I think the case has been settled, and you can keep your precious money. I don't want paying for discovering things like that."

"I told her ... She's left me now, of course. I just wanted you to know that I don't blame you ... I know you were only doing your job –"

"– and you weren't?"

"I've sent a cheque through the post. You should get it in the morning. Goodbye Mr Simpson."

Simpson never did cash the cheque.

THE END

Dave Hughes is probably best known to *BBR* readers as the co-editor of *WORKS* magazine, although his stories and poetry have appeared in numerous small press magazines, including *The Scanner* and *Auguries*. Dave, 29, lives in Slaithwaite, near Huddersfield, with his wife and two children, and in his spare time terrorises his colleagues at British Telecom with his rather mean Donald Sinden impersonation.

David L.
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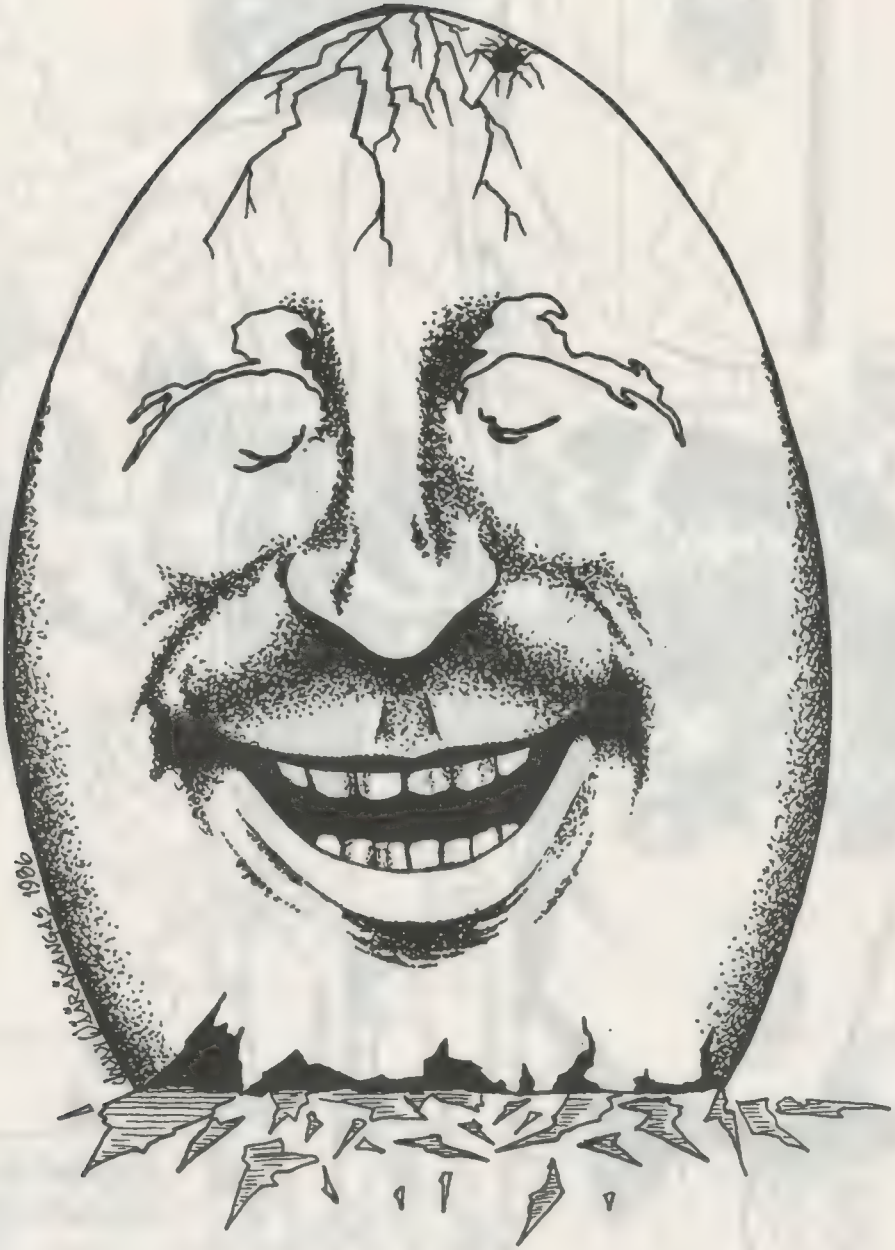

WILLIAM STRANGE 1986

THE LAST LAUGH

Matthew Dickens

The origin of the Joke is now lost in the vagaries of time; its conception has been attributed, variously, to a fourth century Buddhist monk named Sha peh, an obscure sect of Carthaginian mystics known simply as 'the Seven', a (possibly apocryphal) pair of Siamese twins from twelfth century Rome, three, or possibly six, of the serving wenches at the court of Louis XI, Louis XI himself, the great tenth century Shogun, Xan li Fashima, the inmates of a lazar-house in southern Nepal around the time of Hannibal, the Barbary Corsair Red Douglas, the entire population of Luxembourg, Samuel Johnson ... The list is (naturally) endless.

'Naturally' because the Joke itself is endless. Any attempt to totalize it, to neatly order its parts for analysis, will prove as futile, and as unfeasible, as an attempt to gather and assign names to each individual grain of sand in the Sahara.

That being so, how can the question, 'What is the Joke?' ever be answered. The answer is: it cannot. But there is a logical error here: if the answer to the question of the Joke is that there is no answer, then there *is* an answer - which is absurd.

Certain scholars studying the Joke have devoted their entire lives to this logical conundrum alone, little guessing, poor fools, that in trying to understand the Joke they have themselves fallen victim to its remorseless irony. Therefore we will reject the logical method of inquiry straight away. (Some logicians, incidentally, have deliberately driven themselves insane by wrestling with the sublime illogic of the Joke, with the aim of achieving a better understanding of it by reproducing its supreme disorder in their own minds; but once again, the Joke was on them, for the Joke is very far from being disordered.)

For the purposes of our inquiry, the preferred mode of approach will be one of wry fatalism, a total scepticism in all systems of order and rationality - in short, with anything that aids the understanding. We know immediately that we can never hope to penetrate the Joke's infinite mysteries, and so we will relieve our minds of the burden of finding meaning. Possibly the Joke contains all possible meanings within itself - or perhaps it does not; we really cannot say.

And yet - we do possess a clue. If there is a joke, it follows that it must be played upon some person or persons. Already we are slipping back into the logical folly of presupposing a purpose; but perhaps the Joke's architect(s) intended this, as a means of entry to the whole question of the Joke. Thus, in a typically Joke-like way, we are ensnaring ourselves in the very trap we hope to avoid through inquiry; we are playing the Joke upon ourselves.

There is a school of thought which holds that the Joke found its inception in the desire of certain individuals to play a practical joke upon certain individuals, chosen carefully, or at random - a practical joke, moreover, that would surpass all earlier practical jokes. It would be no mere case of planting a firecracker under the privy, or putting live termites in the broth - no, this joke would be infinitely more subtle. The original Jokers, whoever they were, hit upon the idea of turning the entire lives of their victims into a single, perpetual Joke, an endlessly ramifying irony whose very existence the victim would either never guess (still less fathom), or miscontrue (for example attributing their misfortune to their god).

As time passed, the notion of the Joke as purely practical fell into disrepute; there are few now rash enough to proclaim that the Joke could be something as essentially knowable (even ingenuous) as a *practical* joke. The Joke is neither simply practical nor simply verbal, but owes something to both. It is in the impossibility of its ever being wholly executed, or wholly told, that its problematic consists. The final yanking away of the chair from the descending backside of the oblivious human race, the final triumphant revelation of the punchline - are inconceivable in our present circumstances.

It must be stressed that the Jokers' victims would not live a life of misery, blundering from one cruel Joke-conceived disaster to another; they could lead uneventful, even happy, lives - and yet the Joke would always be with them, interweaving its fantastic nature with their facile one.

These individuals, the victims, would die in the Joke. But it would not die with them; there were always more souls to take the place of

those who had departed. In this way, the Joke was passed on (ironically, needless to say) by its victims, who became, at the satirical moment of death, the Jokers. Nor was the Joke partial; it could engage anyone, high or low, from the most ingenuous peasant to the most cunning politician.

Another school of thinkers (the theological) argues that the Joke is final proof of the existence of God. Only a divine being, they insist, could have conceived such a complex and breathtakingly beautiful thing as the Joke. They point to the Bible as the supreme example of God's wicked sense of humour. Where else, they demand, can one find a book so rich in satire, in reckless mirth, in all the risible stuff of creation? A book by turns farcical and comic, mordant and grotesque, whimsical and wry, and, perhaps above all, richly black. Indeed, these scholars are the happiest men alive, for they spend all day in their academies, their oak-panelled studies, reading each other excerpts from this remarkable book, and shrieking with delight.

But we have digressed. Naturally, there is no way of knowing where the Joke is active, who it is engaging, the effect it has upon them and the Jokers alike. Quite possibly, the Joke is universal, and infinitely extended. If so, it would indeed be analogous to God Himself, Joke and Joker fused into a single self-parodist. Such a theory was originally proposed by Kelal Sjaat, a yogi from Baghdad, who eventually strangled himself with his bare feet, when he suspected that his God was secretly laughing at all his ascetic self-immolations.

Much of what presently goes about under the name of 'comedy' can also be traced back to the Joke. The very absurdity of this proposition is irrefutable evidence of its validity. All jokes, practical or otherwise, partake of the Joke – or so the Comic Platonists argue. Some cynics moan that the Joke is faltering, that after centuries, or eons, it is finally coming to an end. These muddle-headed teleologists have even gone so far as to inaugurate a Society for the posteriorization of the Joke, and even now may be seen in scattered locales from Cairo to Vladivostock, peering near-sightedly at passers-by, and attempting to trace and preserve, the elusive being of the Joke.

Such is the nihilism of our age they may even succeed. To worship the Joke in this fashion is to spit upon the spirit in which it was formed. Which, it goes without saying, was precisely what its progenitors intended.

Always we find ourselves returning to the Joke; it is fascinating and repugnant, finite and infinite, immemorial and ephemeral. Possibly there is only the Joke and nothing else. We cannot trust our senses (who, for example, sane or lunatic, would dream of writing the word "reality", except in quotation marks?) If this is true, the only thing we can be sure of is the Joke; not even death is certain, for who can say with confidence that death is not merely some other state, different yet identical to ours, in which the Joke continues to work its magic?

If the Joke is indeed its own object, as some aver, then it can have no beginning and no end – only a ceaseless self-reflexiveness in which all things are gathered but never appear. This spurious fragment too will, in a moment, be caught up and hurled into the vortex of the Joke, there to be negated and affirmed. This, superfluous to say, struggle, can never be terminated but for the advent of something scarcely conceivable, a thing which always slips away from us.

A little earlier, we commented on the impossibility of the Joke's ever being finally played on, or told to, a suppositional victim or hearer. If this hypothesis is correct, the solution lies not in some mystical *telos*, or ending to the Joke, but rather a counter-force, some entity in which the Joke's innuendoes, its parodies and endlessly stifled giggles, will be absorbed and swallowed up; such a force could go only by the name of the Anti-Joker.

Some of our brightest young men and women are presently engaged in research, seeking this grail. Some of the mirthless ideologies of recent times are rumoured to be the first fruits of this activity. But when these scholars find what they seek, what will happen then? Will the Joke's dubiously benign influence cease? When the precise antithesis of the Joke is revealed, and the truth is no longer an absurd abstraction, what then? Will we have freed ourselves ... to Weep?

THE END

Matthew Dickens was born in 1969 and will be starting his final year at Southampton University, where he is reading English, in the autumn of 1989. His favourite authors include Ballard, Dick, Shaw, D.G. Compton, Disch, Pynchon ... Music-wise, he's a New Orleans jazz fan. This is Matthew's second appearance in *BBR:* his story "Enthousiasmos" was featured in issue #12.

IT'S A RUBBEROID WORLD

To people who happen to stumble across the small press scene quite by accident, the wealth of activity and the undeniable talent it contains, which was until then unnoticed, is quite exciting, exhilarating and overwhelming. The same can be said of rubber stamp art, or mail-art. The effect is surreal. You have seen commercial rubber stamps before, but never seen them used this way. You get hooked ...

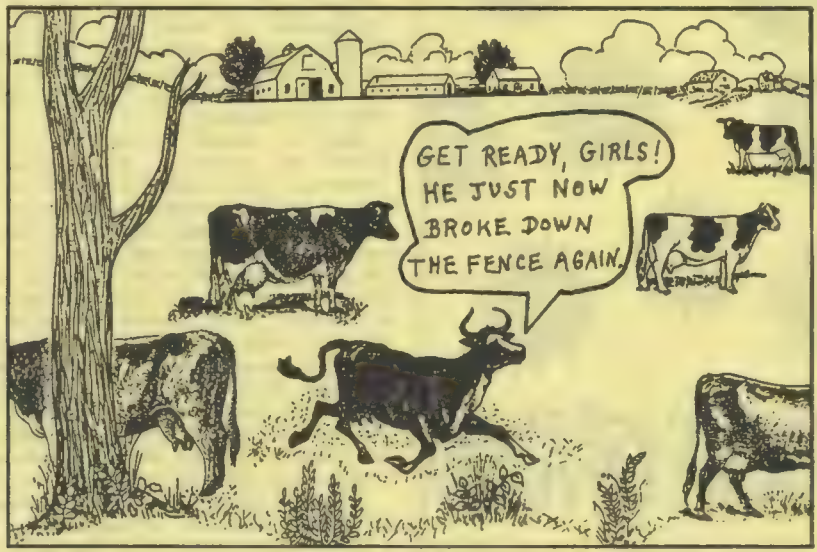
Mailart has been in existence since rubber stamps were first ever made, back in the 19th century. They are interesting things to handle. There is a strange fascination in being able to endlessly duplicate a sometimes rather intricate image. On anything.

Rubber stamping is essentially an ink collage. Or a stamping assemblage. Your "found objects" are the stamps, the composite printed images your collage. No drawing skill is required, yet quite elaborate compositions of some worth can be created in spite of that. And it's FUN!

In the United States rubber stamp mailart is a booming art form. A number of stores sell nothing but rubber stamps, whilst an even larger number of card shops and toy stores also stock rubber stamps. Most of the manufacturers are small, one person operations, and sell retail by mail as well as wholesale. A popular alternative to commercially made stamps is the home-made variety, and many people are into making their own by carving erasers into rubber stamps.

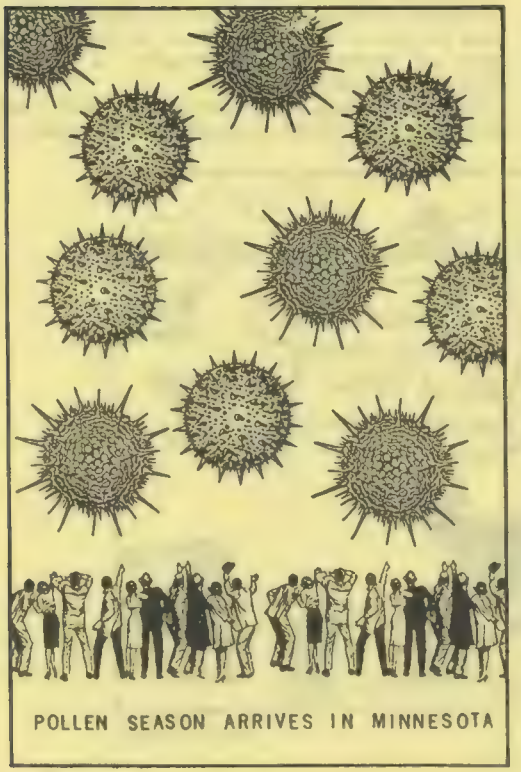
People's tastes and efforts range widely, from cutesy, to political, to minimalist, to esoteric, to erotic (a number of small rubber stamp companies have a "Special" X-rated catalogue available on request; one company even specialises in rubber stamps for gays), to abstract, to way-out humorous, to nostalgic, to science fiction, to naturist ...

Rudi Rubberoid, from Bellingham, USA, got involved with rubber stamping after a number of



Oncle George

Michael Sakolsky



Tom Nelson

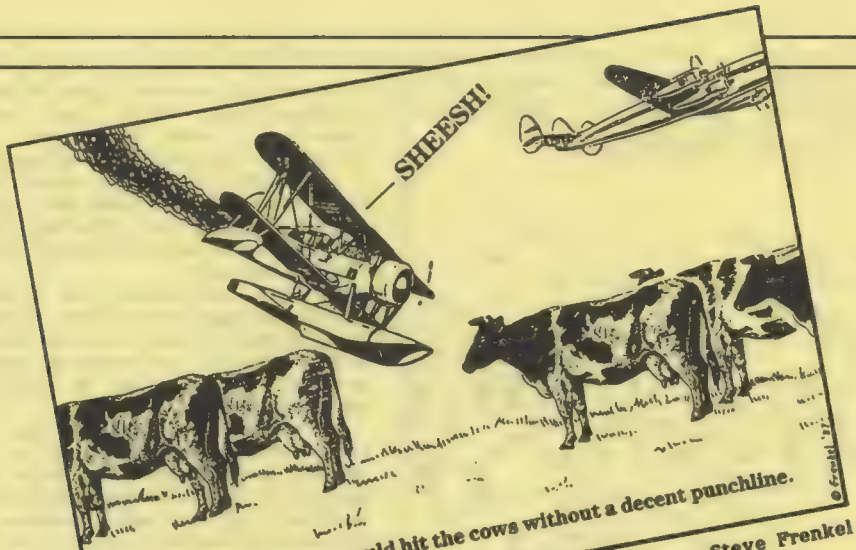
years getting nowhere Attempting To Be A Painter. Now he is editor of *The Rubber Fanzine*, one of the leading Stateside journals of the art, and from whose pages the accompanying artwork is reprinted. He describes the variety of content and technique as one of the prime excitements of running a mailart magazine. "When I open an envelope I have absolutely NO idea of what kind of contribution I am going to get. After three years there is still a lot of room for surprise."

Rudi recommends as essential for the mail-artist the magazine *Rubberstampmadness*, a bimonthly publication devoted to rubber stamping. It has 32 tabloid size newsprint pages, and reviews rubber stamp catalogues, has articles on rubber stamp people and how to do it articles, as well as many adverts from the small rubber stamp companies. *The National Stampagraphic* is a another good source magazine, published quarterly and covering much the same territory.

Rubber stamp mailart is yet to take off on this side of the Atlantic to the extent of the popularity which it has achieved in the States, but already British artists are making a name for themselves, such as Art Nahpro and the A1 Waste Paper Co. Ltd., both from London.

Both Art Nahpro and A1 Waste Paper refer to a thriving "Network" of mailartists.

"There are those people who send art through the post without realising there is such a thing



It was too late! Tom would hit the cows without a decent punchline.

Steve Frenkel

Michael Sakolsky

Art Kornfeld

as a mail art network," says Michael Leigh of A1 Waste Paper. "When I was a student many years ago I used to exchange letters and collages and silly drawings with my small circle of art student friends. It seemed very natural to plaster our envelopes and packages with rubber stampings and drawings, and couldn't understand why other folk sent such boring mail through the post!

"It wasn't until 1980 that I discovered the Network through the Artlink International Mail Art Exhibition at the Greenwich Theatre Gallery here in London, and gradually my mailing list grew to the hundreds of weird people we exchange with today."

Art Nahpro (Paul Jackson) was introduced to the Network by Michael at A1, and also speaks of the great number of people he has met through it: "It is a strange and oddly satisfying preoccupation," he says. "Because one's name and address become part of the Network one can attract mail from all over the place – I used to try and answer everything that I received but alas I have not been able to do that all the time."

Michael and Hazel at A1 have contacts with other mail artists all over the world. "The Network is worldwide and not only includes USA and UK but Italy, Germany, France, Belgium, Holland, Japan and even the Iron Curtain countries. The notable exceptions are Africa (just one person in Gambia), China, India, Australia, New Zealand and Russia (just one couple who turned up since Glasnost!)"

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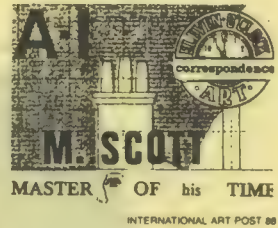
A. 1. WASTE PAPER CO. LTD.



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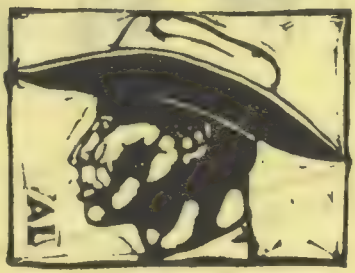
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Art Nahpro

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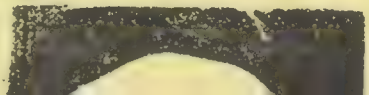
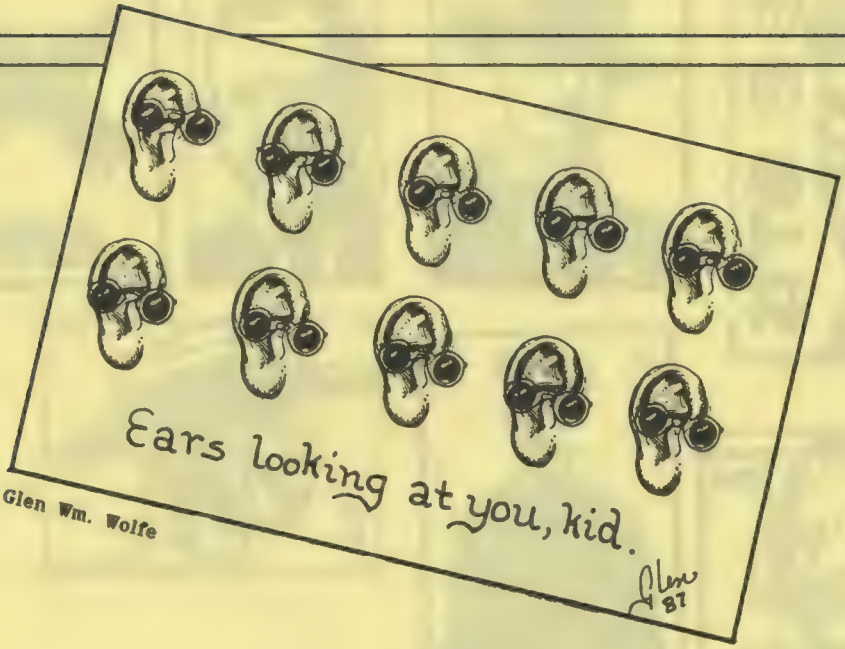
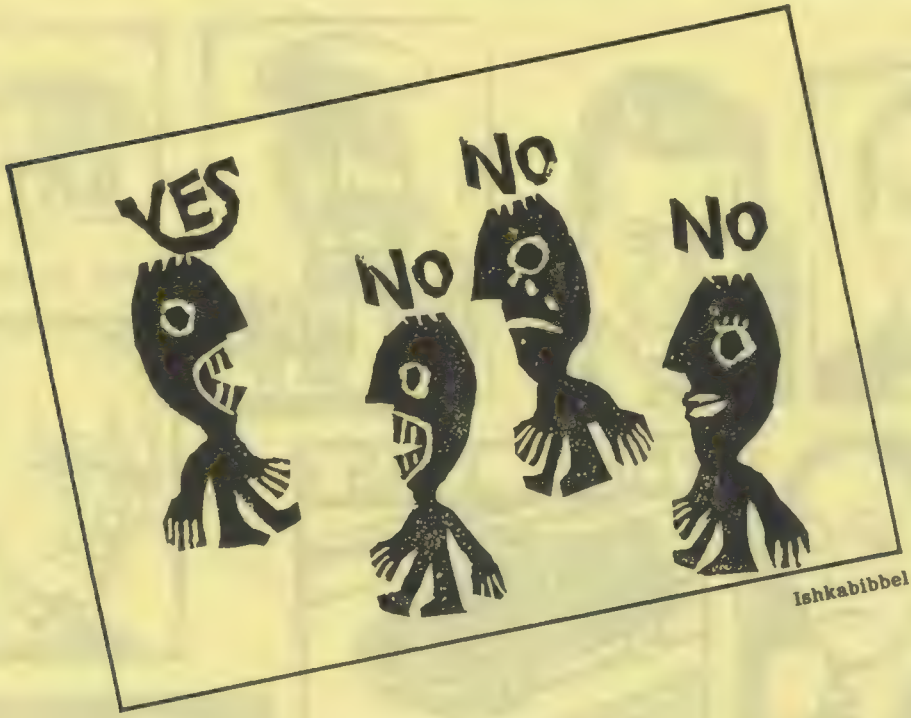
John Heartfield

MAIL THIS





Glen Wm. Wolfe

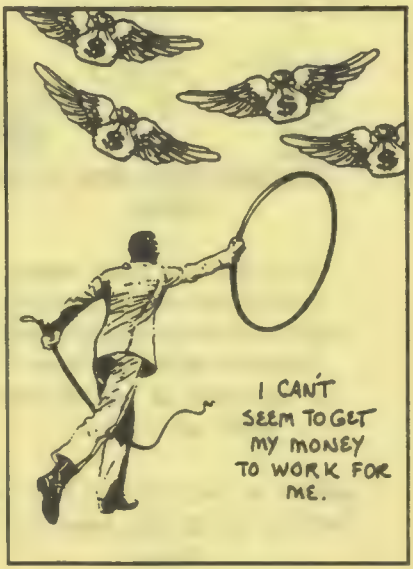


Ishkabibbel

FLAP-JACKS

NOT THE CORRECT WAY TO PREPARE FROG LEGS!

NOT THE WAY TO MAKE HUSH PUPPIES!


I CAN'T SEEM TO GET MY MONEY TO WORK FOR ME.

Any Salyer

Yuck, thought Gidra, another of those large indigestible flies.

Steve Frenkel

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What you have seen here is just a sample of what rubber stamp mailart is capable of. My thanks to Rudi Rubberoid and the participating artists for their cooperation in compiling this article.

For further information, contact the following specialist magazines. Unless otherwise indicated, the prices quoted are for inland postage in the USA, so add an appropriate amount to cover for overseas postage when ordering, or write for overseas prices.

THE RUBBER FANZINE, Rudi Rubberoid, PO Box 2432, Bellingham, WA 98227-2432 USA. A4, 20 pages. $1:70 each.

THE NATIONAL STAMPAGRAPHIC, 1952 Everett Street, N. Valley Stream, NY 11580 USA. A4, 40 pages, quarterly. $3:60 each, $18:00 for four issue subscription outside the USA.

RUBBERSTAMPMADNESS, PO Box 6585, Ithaca, NY 14851 USA. Tabloid, 40 pages, bimonthly. $4:00 each, $30:00 for six copy subscription outside the USA.

A1 WASTE PAPER CO. LTD. (Hazel Jones & Michael Leigh), 71 Lambeth Walk, London SE11 6DX.

ART NAHPRO (Paul Jackson), 56 Crampton Road, London SE20 7AT.

ROOT CANAL THERAPY

IAN WATSON

When she thrusts her tongue
Into his mouth, in that bedroom
Of the Prague hotel, a pang of pain
Nearly lifts the roof off his skull
So that he gasps, he almost cries
Orgasmically; she draws back,
Disconcerted. He apologizes
"Sorry, Nina! Not your fault."

(How like a woman he sounds,
Consoling her clumsy lover, thus:
"You're doing fine. Honestly!
"There's nothing wrong with your style.
"I felt an ancient menstrual ache,
"That's all. Let's try again."
But erotic magic will have melted
As snowflakes into slush.)

"My damn tooth. Pain's fading.
"If I could drink some brandy?"
At the Socialist Poetry Festival
Tomorrow, he's due to recite.
Tonight his translator shares
The sheets with him, yet suddenly
His nakedness is limp. An erection
Of pain in his tooth: a failure

Of the fierce flesh lower down.
How to explain adequately?
He hopes his story is absurd
Enough to whet her appetite,
Full of zany images to compensate
And wet her flesh again while
He recovers earlier vigour.
"My previous dentist," he explains,

"A man in a smelly tweed suit:
"The sort of brute who leaves bruises
"On your cheeks from the head-lock
"He clutches you in ... that type!
"In his window, a painted wooden duck;
"A hunting decoy, I thought.
"He learned I was a poet, person
"Of unprejudiced imagination.

"His eye gleamed. 'I can tell you,'
"He said, 'things that will interest
"'A poet!' So while my mouth
"Was filled with silver tools
"Immobilising my poetic tongue
"He told me how he was a worshipper
"Of the ancient god called Tiw.
"Tuesday is named after Tiw.

"Though not many people know this.
"For him the world was chock-a-block
"With symbols of potent Tiw.
"The duck was one. I forget
"The others. Next he confided
"How many enemies he had amongst
"The fraternity of archaeologists
"Not to mention vicars and bishops.

"The church has a word for people
"'Who follow the old ways.'
"I thought he would show me
"My dental records. Instead
"He flourished photocopies
"Of Runic inscriptions about Tiw."
Nina yawns: a cave of teeth, her tongue
Pink tigress lolling in its den.

— IAN BROOKS — 1984 —

"It's true, Nina!" "Carry on,"
She says. "You really fascinate me.
"Are there still covens in your country?
"Do they hold orgies? Do dentists disrobe
"And skip around a fire with virgins?"
He daren't yet embrace her again,
But nor does she shuffle off the bed
To gather her strewn garments.

So far so good. A beautiful translator
Should be intimate with every feature
Of her author; how else can she
render his word-play with fidelity?
"Next time, Nina, I found a female dentist.
"I made a socialist choice in favour
"Of sexual equality in the sciences."
"What's so weird about a woman dentist?"

"Male oppression; sexist attitudes back home!
"But she was a total disaster.
"Wrong tooth filled. Abscess. Agony.
"Fever. Penicillin from my doctor.
"She injured the nerve in this tooth,
"Inflamed it. Lied to cover up
"Malpractice. The tooth still drives
"A knife through me at times."

"Times such as this? When you're about
"To exploit another woman?" Nina laughs.
"Maybe she didn't harm your tooth
"At all. Maybe it's all in your mind.
"What did Freud say about the *vagina dentata*,
"The cunt with teeth?" He touches hers.
However, that wasn't an invitation.
He hops from bed: "I'm going

"To write a new poem for tomorrow.
"A special, unexpected poem." She reaches
For her underwear. "Is this what
Freud means by 'art as sublimation'?"
Which he ignores, busy hunting for paper.
"You'll need to translate it impromptu.
"I hope you're up to it." Cotton hides
Her pubic mound; a pen is found.

Next day in the Palace of Culture
He proclaims his newly scribbled verses
Beneath red banners and stars:
"Teeth capped with gold, a hill
"Of teeth trodden by young blond Nazis
"Whose jackboots crush grains of *Geld*
"From the stained old ivory fangs
"Like peasants treading grapes." So far
So good. "Teeth bit the apple
"Of the world: teeth a-gleam
"With the paste of prosperity,
"While poorer teeth blacken and rot.
"Yet teeth are the most indestructible
"Part of the human body, though
"Corruptible - is corruption indestructible?"
Nina translates fluently. Applause.

He faces her. "A nude man reclines
"In a dentist's chair; the female dentist,
"Naked. Her breasts, so firm:
"White molars of her chest.
"His penis is a piercing canine.
"She holds a needle in one fist,
"Of novocaine, to numb him.
"Her other fingers grip a silver spoon

"Of true cocaine, to make him feel
"Intense sensations. She kisses him
"Upon the brow; into his ear she hisses,
"'At dental school they taught us
"'That teeth of executed criminals,
"'Ground up and pulverized, restore
"'Virility. So eat the powdered fangs
"'I pulled from men's jaws last month.'

"He eats; then she mounts the seat
"To explore the icebergs of his mouth
"With the spatule of her tongue,
"While he in turn enters his dentist,
"Filling her ..." At this point
His capacity audience begin to murmur.
But Nina, hastily improvising in Czech,
Invents a properly radical alternative.

Afterwards he wins the medal of merit
Of the Festival - in company with poets
From Cuba and Colombia and Congo Brazzaville.
Drunk on champagne, he's driven to the airport
With Nina by his side. He remembers her
Nakedness as an abstract biographic fact.
But his mind's eye is blind to it
And words have deserted, torn out by the root.

Ian Watson was born in 1943, and brought up on Tyneside. He gave up a career in higher education in 1976 to become a full-time science fiction writer. This is his second appearance in *BBR:* his whimsical tale "La Fin de Bon-Bon" appeared in issue #11.

MOONPIECE

The Monologues

HAKIM BEY

The Moon tugs at liquid, at the sea of certain minds & bodies – & we're not talking just about menstruation – the Moon-obsessed types are well known: the 17th century melancholic, the witch, those who are fixated on childhood, insomniac desert mystics who feel moonlight like water, the most elegant of lycanthropes & inverts.

Like all major symbols, the Moon can be made to mean anything at all – for example, frustration: as if the limbs ache with yearning for buoyancy but cannot lift up from this gravity well of the dense August City, heavy, suffocating under a Moon that taunts us like untouched flesh, all the bodies we never know, the eyes which might have cooled our eyes.

Or sterility. All we have learned of the Moon has turned it grey & claustrophobic, littered with tin flags & plastic bags of astronaut shit. Even the ancients knew the wellworn trope of our satellite's sterility – but the science of our Empire has transmuted lunar silver to the porous lead of an old black-&-white TV on the blink, tuned into the late-nite void.

Every day we fail to create or love would be torment without the drug of solitude to etherize the sensorium. Our Moon will go with its empty sensual promises – the vulgar dawn will come & threaten us with premonitions of an unlived life.

In this sense the Moon is our companion: weighted down with smothered desires, no longer the wild unknown utopia hinted at

by moons painted on children's ceilings or in storybooks, moons seen in Persia or from the roofs of perverse hotels in Luzon, Penang or Suryakarta, or from Siamese beaches – the moons of tropicalismo, of palm trees & strange delicate sex

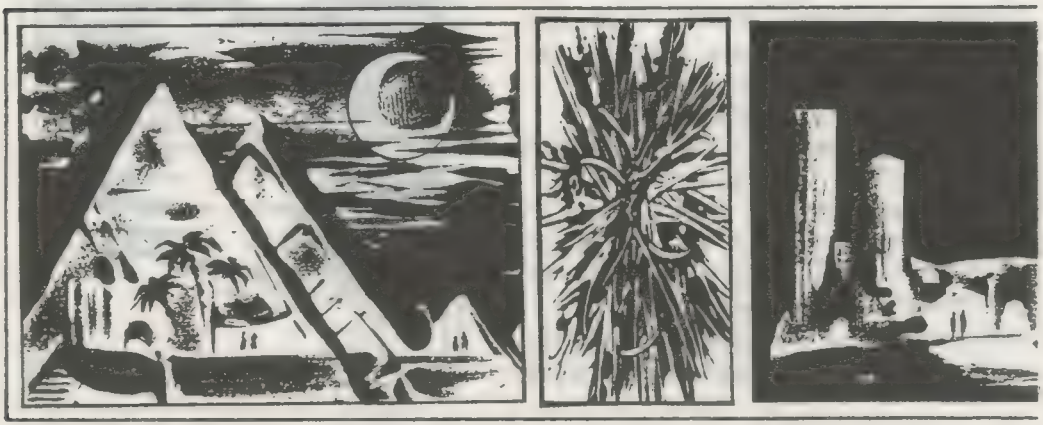
the Moon which signals the end of fasting, of frustration.

When Brazilians, Cubans & New Yorkers emigrated to the Moon they took Afro-polytheism along with them – the *orishas* of the Yoruba, cigar-chomping gods in orbit, jungle deities for the Space Age. Most important for the Luna colonists, YEMAYA, goddess of the sea & the Moon, patroness (among other things) of queers – in cheap lithographs depicted as a beautiful Spanish woman in a white dress, hovering several meters over the pocked opal ash-dust surface of the Moon, background of phosphorescent mountains & craters against a cobalt starglitter sky – in her long black hair white roses form & precipitate like condensation & drip to the ground – from her hands (in a *mudra* of generosity) blue roses pour constantly as waterfalls. In trance we seek her blessing on our work.

"I am a free prince," said the buccaneer Samuel Bellamy – & each worshipper of Yemaya is a free priest or priestess of Yemaya. No one stands between us & our divine selves. Moonstone, tarnished silver, grey velvet, sperm, fluorescence & neon, opal, jellyfish, scented white lotion spattered on pale skin, silvery fish leaping in zero gravity – aura of orgone glowing & crackling blue around her head, blue gestures, blue voice – animal-hide drums studded with cowrie shells. She stands for the Creative Imagination, which has made our Moon a pirate utopia, an autonomous zone where the spirit flows like water, a place of risk & compassion.

In certain cultures the Moon like a crystal bowl holds the souls of the dead, who disturb us because they are real yet imaginal – & so we find them on this threshold-planet, this liminal or in-between world separating Earth from the planetary & zodiacal heavens, neither here nor there.

Necromancy for us is no more than a kind of intuitive historiography, an artistic relation with the past neither real nor unreal, like conversation with a ghost (drawn to the bowl of blood). The Moon for example has been mapped with the names of dead Natural Philosophers – the entire Library of Alexandria survives invisibly on its face: Eratosthenes, Rhaeticus, Dionysius, Apollonius, Isidore, Theophilus ... each of these craters now covered with a dome, supplied with artificial gravity & synthetic weather – and somehow these Cities become Alexandrias of the



Imagination.

Old architectural styles also end up on the Moon after their death on Earth. Here everything is built *trompe l'oeil,* orientalismo, colonial Baroque, plastic Art Deco, Hollywood Baghdad – theme parks, necropolises, lunar Egypts come to life from the designs of old cigarette packets – miniature pyramids, houses in the shape of sphinxes, pre-fab minarets, pleasure canals, ziggurats

a never-never Alexandria made of necromantic chunks of lost history & dubious fantasy, part 1911, part 1st century B.C. – the poet Cavafy cruising the wharf cafés, dreaming of neoplatonic athletes, Ptolomeic aesthetes, tragic Hellenistic dandies – moonface fat King Farouk languidly puffing a turkish oval, his fez tipped rakishly, eyes puffy, lips too red & soft

the anarchist cigarette-workers union on strike, inflammatory pamphlets printed in some half-Greek, half-Arabic patois – syrupy inky coffee flavored with amber & hashish – the child brothels ... the Library in flames, the lighthouse at Pharos half-crumbled into the sea

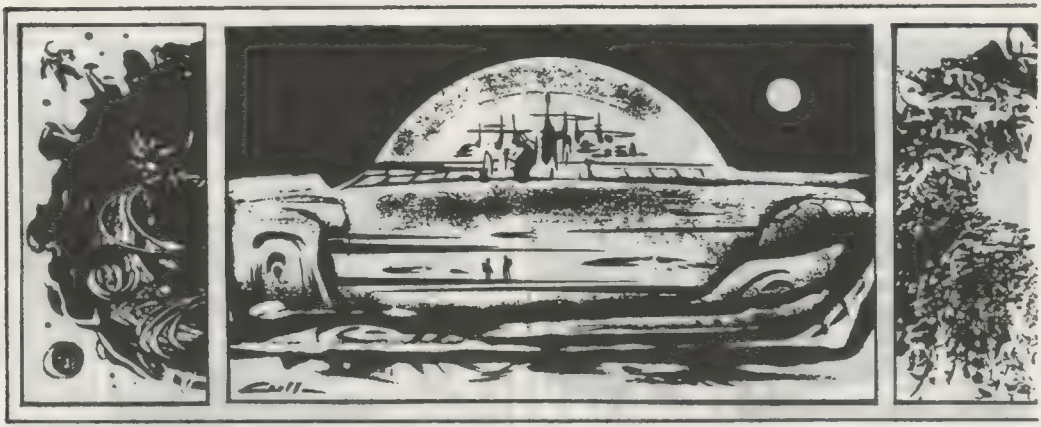
laminated templates or palimpsestic images of time piled up in archaeological strata – & our Moon captures and cuts through them all, our Moon bustles with elegant & learned spectres, revenants & phantoms.

On the Darkside of the Moon, north of the Sea of Fires, between the craters of Cyrano & Paracelsus, lies the hidden City of New Alamut. In 2157, during the major period of Lunar settlement, a group of Ismailies broke away from the Aga Khan & swore to revive the pure doctrine of the medieval Assassins – the Great Resurrection at Alamut, when Hassan II, Old Man of the Mountain, proclaimed, "The Chains of the Law have been broken!" – the esoteric Millennium, each soul already perfect & incapable of sin – pure antinomianism or radical monism of the most heretical flavor.

The new sect migrated *en masse* to the Moon – their Imam's fabulous wealth secured the remote & secret site of New Alamut – & during the First Wars of Dissolution (2201), the sectarians quietly settled into the underground City, seceded from United Luna, cut themselves off from the Web, & began clandestine propaganda for a fullscale autonomist uprising.

The synthesis of food from basic elements, self-replicating robotics & cybernetically-controlled environments have made the Lunar Cities potential Edens – & yet the Colonial Régime conspired to maintain economic & psychic oppression, an artificial network of stingy welfare & Gnostic moralism – (everyone knows the Administration is packed with Dualist Christians, the so-called "Neo-Alexandrians" with their cult of self-denial & hysterical salvationism).

So the Assassin propaganda found sympathetic listeners among the



immigrant hordes (Javanese, Irish, Sephardim, Han Chinese, Filipinos, American Indians, etc.) in backwater Cities like Geber & Nasroddin where the Dissolution Wars first broke out & continued to flare up throughout the century.

A number of anarcho-mystical cults mushroomed in this period, based on bizarre syncretisms of Santería & Candomblé, neo-paganism, sufism, the works of Bakunin & Stirner, the science of Tesla & Reich, Chaos Theory, Black Islam & extremist Shiism - especially the revolutionary metaphysic of New Alamut.

At present, several Cities have managed to secure *de facto* independence from the Régime in Copernicus, have declared themselves autonomous zones without any form of government, & have instituted various utopian schemes ranging from Occultist Syndicalism to pure dada madness ...

(excerpted from Johun de Sacrobosco, *The Lunar Entropy Wars;* Copernicus, 2298, pp. iv-vii.)

Runaway children on the Moon. They get there in chariots lofted by swans. They get there as stowaways on the seedy tramp liners of the Luna Line, oldest commercial freight company in the solar system. Tying little bottles & phials of dew to their clothing & limbs, they wait till the moonlight draws the liquid back to itself (for dew originally falls from the Moon) by its magical tides, & they float into the air elevated by the force of the Moon's attraction. Once safely arrived, they join bands of

wild children who live in the abandoned quarters of Geber, Abenezra, Nasroddin & Heraclitus, south of the Sea of Nectar. They play in underground pools perpetually lit by dim blue globes, they swim in dark canals cut through black selenite, they sleep in hanging gardens overgrown with unexpected mutant flowers – well-hidden from the prowling Gnostic Police, the Orphanage in Copernicus, the borstals of the Colonial Régime. The Government is half eaten away by Chaos, wide cracks have opened in its sterile abstractions. The children act as agents of the Darkside Domes, the autonomous zones, the unmapped settlements – but aside from their espionage & sabotage, the very pattern of their childlife has become an emblem of insurrection: the tribal imagery of their bodies spooks the sweat-dreams of flat bureaucrats & atrophied moralists. Some call the children sorcerers & claim they send these dreams – or demon-selves – to taunt & seduce, broadcast by a kind of psychic radio across the cold and airless Sea of Clouds & Bay of Storms.

Children when they sleep pyjamas cut from sorcerers' robes, cobalt-blue with a pattern of white stars, comets, ringed planets, crescent moons

pirate dreams, childhood as a pirate utopia – inspired not by violence & theft so much as the mysterious lasciviousness of freedom, the unnameable eroticism of the island, white sand & palm trees, the chest of gold, the half-naked men in barbarous jewels

the child's bedroom painted like a planetarium, with a zodiac of

silver & gold spangles on walls & ceiling the color of sky at 9 PM in June, a gold-blue ranging into the indigo-black of sleep

the white sheets, the white bed like a ship, spaceship, emblem of pleasure, white shadowed by the blue of darkness & sleep

the Moon outside the window; nightbreeze, dark as lavender, undulates the billowing white curtains like glowworms made into fluttering gauzy cloth

Moon, masturbation, fireflies, languorous stretching of hypnogogic limbs under linen sheets in slanted moonlight, slow moonlove of pirate sleep

children without parents or guardians, living alone, spontaneous, languidly asleep, revealing their true faces, before they were born, the tao of sleep, the sex of sleep

voyage to the Moon, the island of wild children, the silvery rocket & gold falling sparks of sleep, the erection, the chafing of starchy sheets, the slippery pool of moonlight.

Hakim Bey, formerly poet laureate to a minor deposed rajah in the NW Frontier Province of Pakistan, jailed briefly for suspected anarchist bomb outrage, now divides his time between "a seedy chinatown hotel" and his AirStream trailer in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. Some of his work has appeared in *Reality Hackers, Apocalypse Culture, Rants & Incendiary Tracts, Semiotext(e) USA,* and *The Stiffest of the Corpse.* "Moon Piece" first appeared in a now defunct marginal magazine, *Live from the Stagger Café.*

HMS MORPHEUS

ANOTHER QUIET DAY ON THE DARK FRONTIER :-
What to do What to do ??
I know
I'll go out...
SLAM
AND HAVE A WALK IN THE GREAT OUTDOORS
YES INDEEDY, THIS IS THE LIFE!
HANG ON
HANG ON WHERE AM I?
YIPES!
The MODERN BRITAIN Exhibition
THIS WAY
TO THE TUMP

MARTIN CHATFIELD

TO BE CONTINUED ...

THE FATHERS

Lyle Hopwood

San Cristobal is a muddy, dirty little town. No-one there has any values, or even any value. In the three hours I was there I saw two mestizos playing cards. The loser got pissed and leaned over the table, hooked his fingers in his oppo's hair and pushed his thumbs into the other guy's eyes. I watched it quite calmly – I've seen a lot of movie special effects – and when it sank in an hour later I walked out of the bar and threw up in the gutter. Then I bought myself another drink. With the scotch inside me I was working up quite a little hurricane of racism about poor, filthy people littering the countryside, no regard for human life, even though I remembered the ruined pyramids of a rich, ethical society jutting through the jungle under the airplane.

Back in Boston I'd planned to stay in San Cristobal for a few days and tour the local ruins, but I realized I was just postponing the trip to Leearee's farm. It was twenty kilometers into the jungle, and I'd assumed I'd have to ride, but I persuaded a cab driver with little difficulty. The cab driver was an Historic Ruin himself. Half Manaree, half something the Brazilians had brought in, he had opinions like I had unwashed socks, piles of malodorous statements that could've been easily cleaned up with a little time and care and effort.

He had nothing good to say about Leearee. She'd bankrupted the *finca*, shamed the Montez family, let the kudzu overgrow the Manaree shrines along the river; "Well fisherkinged," the cabdriver said. "The old man broke his back playin' polo and the little girl she let the whole *finca* rot as he rotted."

I tried to set my thoughts in order as the polite jazz on the cab's CD jumped and jumped and jumped with every rut in the road. Great jungle trees all around hid whooping birds, or maybe monkeys. Occasionally something big crashed around in the branches. Sometimes, a dead silence broke by the pinking jazz. Leearee was seventeen, heir to some minor fortune built on rubber till the market crashed, and forced indentured labour of starving mestizos ever since. And with the old man out of action, she was losing it. The labour ran away, and the Manaree snuck back into the *finca* and farmed their half-wild corn and peppers, fished the crumbled irrigation ditches. The thugs who abetted her father in keeping the labour in line deserted her for the *Finca* Lemonflower six miles up the Manaree river.

The cabdriver was still talking about the old man, getting technical about the wound that put the *Finca* Los Gatos out of the exploitation category. "The guy is paralyzed, right? He's got no control over his body functions and he lies in bed all the time." I imagined an old, old man with a hook nose waving his hands to attract a nurse. Not like that, I knew. Gregorio was forty-two, and he'd a welterweight's build, till the accident. "You lie in bed wet like that you get bedsores, and I took the doctor down here last January to do the debridement. Said the guy's back was an open wound from here," he pointed to the yoke at the back waistband of his jeans, "to here." He slapped his shoulder, and the cab dove into another rut before he could get his hand back onto the wheel. "I told Na Ban about it and I guess I saved Gregorio Montez' life." He looked at me, waiting for my nod to carry on.

But I was gazing out of the window, watching vegetation grown into some textbook illustration of primitive life. Vines hanging down from the canopy, brown with rot but still living. Trees you only see in atriums in banks growing wild and untrimmed hundreds of feet high, stretching out over the road. And the road suddenly seemed fragile, unable to hold back the fighting

pressure of the life flanking it. "How was that?" I said, more to hear the sound of a human voice than to hear the answer.

"Na Ban is the chief of the local Indians, the Manaree. I told him about Montez' back and he said, 'I guess I don't want his skin hanging on my tree if it's been soaked in piss for three years.' See, they've hated the Montez family for a hundred fifty years since Don Montez shot half the tribe so he could tap the chicle tree the tribe used as a shrine." By way of explanation, he pushed his chewing gum into the hole where the left upper canine should have been. "Chicle, right? Natural chewing gum. It was big round here once. People gettin' killed for chewing gum. That's what the white man brought us."

Incongruous iron gates appeared on the left side of the road with lions holding shields topping fat brick gateposts. Through the gate lurked the old man's folly, the porch windows pushed wide open into the kitchen garden as though the house had been abandoned in some internal storm. The cabdriver pulled up by the gates. "I'm not going in, and I'm not waiting outside for you. The jungle is full of jaguars and snakes. I'll meet you outside at a set time if you need the cab back."

I shrugged. I hadn't much choice but to trust the driver. There'd be no passing yellow taxis down this road. "Eight a.m. tomorrow," I said. Hospitality was well developed in these parts, and I could get a bed for the night even in this Hispano-Gothic monstrosity. The driver grinned his gap-toothed grin. As soon as I got out, he slewed the cab round and headed back for the town. I saw that the cab's tracks were the only wheeled vehicle tracks visible on the mud-covered road.

Leearee looked younger than I'd expected. Pale, cold face and red, red lips. A nose that an artist would render as two dots. Large luminous eyes all framed with a waterfall of loose black hair. She opened the door without caution or surprise, despite the danger in the trees all around. "Paul," she said. "I knew you'd be here for me." And she opened the door wide to let me in.

In the drawing room the porch doors were propped open, but the scents of the night-flowering creepers outside didn't mask the ancient smell of lavender and macassar and linseed, the refined smells of clean town houses prompting old memories in me. In some cupboard in the outhouses she must have found polishes and insecticides from the days of glory of the *finca*. Keeping up, by herself, the warfare of the house against the jungle. And yet, I could hear rats running between the ceiling and the floorboards above. Ropes of mold forced the gloss paint away from the window frames. At the turn of the century, this house may have needed seven servants. Now it only had one.

"How is your father?" An obvious opening! She knew why I was here. She knew I had no concern for the old man, who had beaten her mother as badly as he had beaten his workers.

"He's dying. The doctor won't even come out to see him any more. He's given me a supply of morphine and dressings, told me to ride out for him when father dies and he'll issue the death certificate from his office. Nobody cares for my father apart from me."

That was certainly true. Nazi war criminals had found friends here, but old man Montez had no friends, not one. Just a daughter, who was more than he deserved. And whom I'd come to take away. There wasn't a right moment to start discussing this. Any point where I came to discuss her mother would be followed by some comment about how much she loved her father. Over a drink I just dove straight in.

"Lee, your mother needs you as much as your father ever did. He can go with us and I'll get him into the hospice in San Luis Obispo. Your mother and I will foot the bill."

No reaction. She gazed at me evenly without changing expression, weighing up the possible answers.

"She's waiting by the phone at this moment, hoping you'll call to say you're coming home with me. I promise that you'll be part of a loving family, your mother, your little stepsister, yourself and me. What do you say, Lee?"

I knew I'd picked the wrong moment to start pleading when she stiffened her back in imitation of some Jane Austen heroine. "I won't leave my father and I won't leave the farm. America is a foreign country and my mother is a stranger."

I shot back, angered: "There's nothing here to remain for! Your father is dying and the *finca* has half collapsed back into the mud! Look outside!"

And she turned to look through the porch doors at the dusk shadows of the garden. By the icehouse I could see a great tree covered in creepers and beyond it the high brick wall, her false horizon.

"I will prepare the evening meal after I have seen to my father," she said. "You may stay tonight, and in the morning I will lend you Perdita, the mare. You can ride south along the road to San Cristobal and leave Perdita at the Wine Merchants for me to collect. Do you want

me to inform my father that he has a guest for dinner today?"

God, no. I shook my head. The Old Man – my wife had always called him that – scared me enough in the abstract. I hadn't the slightest wish to meet him in the flesh.

She crept out like a little girl, but she swept out, regally, in her own mind.

She served a silver service dinner in the glass porch. The doors still stood carelessly open, and I waited in an agony of suspense for the first mosquito bite. Scouting ants scurried over the floor. She had dressed in a black, shoulderless evening dress and put up her jet black hair. In the gloom of the inadequate electric light she could have been taken for my wife, though more frail. Lifting the hair from her neck had even revealed a similar birthmark, a faint strawberry mark in the shape of a quarter moon. I watched her dispassionately. She was my daughter and I had come to take her home.

She was under no such compunction, however; whether she realized that arousing me would ruin my dreams of a happy family, or whether she simply looked for a night with a stranger who would soon be gone, who knows? But she flirted with me as she leaned over close to serve me, watched me with open desire as I ate, not touching her food or her wine but solicitously filling my glass after every sip.

And I sat stonily, silently, previous daydreams of a family grouped around the car fading in front of me, their frozen yogurts melting, their trip to Disneyland now infinitely long. Leearee dismantled my dreams by running her fingernail around the rim of her wine glass and gazing at me with her jungle-animal eyes.

"Perhaps –" I began again, and my voice broke on the first word of the last-ditch sentence. She showed her little white teeth; what had she thought I was about to say? "Perhaps, when Gregorio has passed away, you will come back to us. Telephone us from the station at San Cristobal, and I'll drive back down to pick you up."

She straightened her back again. "When my father dies, I inherit the *finca*. You mustn't attempt to cheat me out of it. It's very valuable, I'm sure you know. I haven't been able to run the farm and look after my father at the same time, so the hands are working elsewhere at the moment. They will come back when I tell them. They will round up the lazy Indians and make them work again. Look how the ivy has grown through the kitchen garden and even up the old chicle tree!" She was excited; she believed it. "Would you like to finish off your meal with a glass of brandy? Father has a fine cellar full of bottles and barrels."

I nodded; I felt as though I was too much on my guard to get drunk tonight. I wondered if she had made up a separate bed for me in this crumbling house. How many rooms were free from damp? And damp in this climate meant mushrooms growing out of shoes in the shoe cupboard. Colonies of ants farming the shoemushrooms. And anteaters lurking in the pantry waiting for the ants to go past with their pieces of mushroom. And jaguars nesting in the icehouse, waiting for sated anteaters to amble by ... perhaps the wine was strong, after all.

Later, I stared fuddled at my third glass of brandy, and realized she was still speaking. "And José was the best. He would carry me on his horse around the *finca*. We would go and flush the Manaree who squatted on the river banks. And sometimes the workers would try to grow corn on our land instead of buying their supplies from our store and José would knock down the canes in their plots. He was a big man with a hat and two guns and everybody was afraid of him except me."

And even later, I was tumbling on a musty bed, holding her burning form in mingled joy and fear, the shoulderless dress slipping from her. And those golden eyes fixed on me, and her jaguar smile.

When I awoke, I'd heard the screaming for some time. I'd dreamed it was Leearee; in my newly-waken mind, I was dreaming some fiction of Electra Complexes and betrayal. I stumbled into some clothes and ran fast towards the screaming – the Old Man's room. I nearly lost my lunch; the guy's room had a distinctive smell, to say the least. By the bed, there was a terrified teenager bearing little resemblance to the Japanese Temple Cat of the night before. The Old Man's cries were diminishing now. His dreadful sores had leaked a putrid fluid until the bedsheets were stiff as canvas, moldering and stinking. There was no doubt that he was dying.

"For God's sake!" she shouted. "Get the doctor! Take Perdita and find the doctor!"

She didn't ask me if I could ride. Partly due to panic, partly due to horror – I mean, have you ever seen a guy whose skin's worn off from bedsores? – I saddled the mare and she took me to San Cristobal, ambling past all those wild atriums and ruined riverbanks. Deep shadows ran behind me, avoiding the sun-pools under

the broken canopy, lingering where fallen trees swayed in their cradles of vines like rigging in some earthborne marina.

I'd have made better time if I'd sat by the gatepost and waited the ninety minutes for the cab. When Perdita joined the road three miles outside San Cristobal, yesterday's tyre tracks had been joined by his fresh set. Perdita made for the Wine Merchants while I tried to remember the Spanish for doctor. San Cristobal pulled out all the stops, and within two hours the doctor had, grumbling, driven me back to the Lion Gates.

He was dead when we got there; no need for the doctor's esoteric tests. By that time, apparently immune to the stench, army ants were already sizing up their find. Dr Cordoba shone a torch into the Old Man's dried eyes, shrugged and began to write out the death Certificate. I looked around in vain for Leearee.

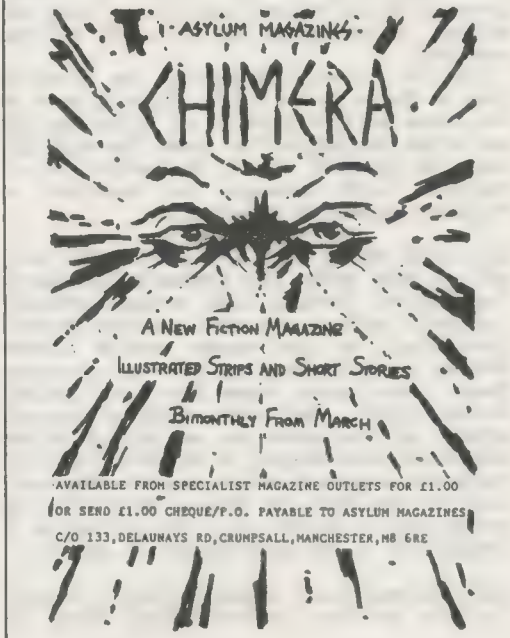
"She will have gone to the *Finca* Lemonflower to bring back her pet brutes," the doctor said, "and I bet you she will be at my surgery for her third abortion next month." I stared at him aghast. He sat on the bed, avoiding the dried brown stain around the corpse. "I think," he began, and then shook his head. "I won't discuss her without her consent. It should be enough to say that she was introduced to sin early on – by the man who thankfully now lies dead in this room – and having no God, and no education, and no conscience either (she is his spit and image in some respects) she will not easily change her ways. If you wish to take her to North America and make her your daughter you will have to kidnap her and employ one of those men who rescue teenagers from the cults of unreason." He raised his voice to continue, because I was already half way down the stairs, but all I caught was, "And furthermore, Señor –"

The ants were eating the remains of our evening meal, too. Through the open porch windows I saw a column of oily smoke rising from the kitchen garden and ran outside. The kudzu had been cleared from around the old tree and charcoal lit in little clay idols like those pots on sale in the tourist market of San Cristobal. Lumps of copal resin had been thrown onto the coals, and the thick yellow incense rose up in a choking cloud. I walked around the tree, bemused. The jungle outside the walls had seemed abandoned and the Manaree in the town walked around in sneakers and T-shirts. Looking at them you'd imagine Na Ban and the rest of the Manaree had as much feel for these ceremonies as I had for archery and coppicing. I'd convinced myself they must have read about it in a tourist guide book, when I happened to look up at the chicle tree itself.

The skin was recognizable; even cleaned and stretched across the bark, even without the long black hair – I knew her skin well enough. Pale as milk it was, though it had begun to discolour in the resinous smoke. And the birthmark was visible on what had been her neck. I ran for the wall and jumped up, grabbing onto the top to look into the wilderness. But it looked as uninhabited as it did yesterday, before the *Finca* Los Gatos fell.

THE END

Lyle Hopwood has rapidly established herself as one of the freshest new writers of sf around today. First published in *BBR* #10 with the much-praised cyberpunk story "The Technophobe" she has since appeared in *Interzone*, and has been invited to contribute to an Austrian women's sf anthology. Born in Yorkshire, Lyle worked as haematologist in a London hospital before moving to California earlier this year.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MAGAZINES

Prose

ELLIPSIS..., 105A North Santa Cruz Avenue, Los Gatos, California 95030, USA. #1: A5, 84pp perfect bound, $7:95. The premier issue of this Californian magazine features a good mix of stories, verse and images. Essentially mainstream in content, the seven stories cover a range of topics, from childhood experience in John Rosenman's "The Awakening" and Peter Telep's "Wetsons", to events seen from the point of view of a supposed nutcase in "The Anti Cancer Diet" by Robyn Parnell and Elizabeth Hall's "Angel", a personal favourite. The emphasis of these stories seems to lie in character building, which is handled quite perceptively, and the role of social factors such as poverty and discrimination in shaping events.

For this reason the one sf story of the magazine, Don Voltz's "First Aid", is the weak link in *Ellipsis'* prose. The idea of a sentient alien performing first aid on an injured spaceman but getting it wrong through a gross misunderstanding of human physiology, though gruesome in its outcome does not gel with the greater sophistication of the rest of the magazine.

Like the line-art illustrations, the poetry is used to divide up the stories. Although some of the poems were too twee for my liking, and not up to the standard of the prose, the highlight was Lyn Lifshin's "Rowdy & Bleating", which combined comic grotesque and reactions to Vietnam veterans to superb effect.

ICE RIVER, 953 N. Gale, Union, OR 97883, USA. #3: A5, 64pp, $4:50. This semiannual journal of "speculative, fantastic and surreal writing", contains a mixture of poetry and short stories. Contributors of the former include Robert Frazier, Lorraine Schein and our very own Steve Sneyd, whilst prose comes from Marc Laidlaw, Richard Singer and Scott Edelman, amongst others. On the whole the stories are rather uninspired and lacking in direction, but the magazine is worth it just to read "The Explanation" by Don Webb, on form as ever with this quirky tale of modern day grail hunting, in a similar vein to his story "Hocus" in *BBR* #12.

NEW PATHWAYS into science fiction & fantasy, c/o MGA Services, PO Box 863994, Plano, TX 75086-3994 USA. #13: A4, 48pp; #14: A4, 72pp, $4 each, subscriptions in Europe 4/$15. Two issues this time around of an American magazine that aims to present the 'cutting edge' of sf and fantasy in the US, just like *BBR* is attempting to do here in the UK. Editor Mike Adkisson is expanding the magazine with every issue to take on board enlarged reviews and features sections.

Issue #13 features a neat c-punk story by Ernest Hogan entitled "Good, Clean Fun" and Don Webb's "Rex", a magical and inventive reworking of post-holocaust survival. There's also work by Scott Edelman, Rob Hollis Miller and Robert Frazier, plus a revealing interview with artist and illustrator Matt Howarth.

Issue #14, a special Third Anniversary edition, sees the image and content revamped to some extent, with a new logo and more pages to accommodate the addition of film reviews and a column on the US and international space programmes. This issue pulls out all the stops for the stories with "Three Evolutionary Enigmas" from regular contributor Brian Aldiss, whilst 1988 British Fantasy Award winner Steve Rasnic Tem provides a suitably enigmatic treatment in a psychiatric institution in "Merry-Go-Round". There's also a 12-page excerpt from John Shirley's new novel *Eclipse Corona*, which works very well as a stand-alone story.

PERDITION PRESS, Wayne Allen Sallee, 3909 West 85 Street 2 Fl, Chicago, Illinois 60652-3738, USA. #0: A5, 80pp, $4. The list of contributors for this prospectus issue reads like a *Who's Who* of American horror: Jeff Johnston, Peggy Nadramia (editor of *Grue*), t. Winter-Damon, Kathleen Jurgens, Dan Opalenik and Wayne Sallee himself to name but a few. For all that though, the magazine doesn't seem to have the sort of edge that one would expect from writers of this calibre, and the material, although good, lacks that certain sparkle to make it *special*. It may be just a vagary of the horror genre that I'm not familiar with, but I don't think so.

Standing out from the crowd in no uncertain fashion, therefore, are the final two stories of the collection, Anke Kriske's "Extra Income", a chilling account of a modern-day Burke and Hare; and "Slime Bug" by Mark Rainey, an account of what happens when a previously benign common insect suddenly becomes malig-

nant, more successful in the horror of its attack on everyday life than in its gory descriptions.

SPACE & TIME, Gordon Linzner, 138 W. 70th Street (4B), New York 10023-4432 USA. #75: A5, 120pp, $5, 4/$19. With this magazine's pedigree, one comes to expect a good read for one's money, and this issue is no exception. The key to these stories is that they not only contain good ideas, but the authors also manage to construct good plots around those ideas, something that any budding writer would be well advised to study.

If I had to pick a favourite, then taking the sf prize would be John E. Stith's "Redshift Runaway", in which a semi-intelligent creature breaks free on a ship travelling in hyperspace, where the speed of light has dropped to ten metres per second. The implications of this are mind-boggling on their own, and extremely well handled.

On the horror front, Ralph Robert Moore's "Big Inches" is a most chilling tale which takes a strip search to its logical (or illogical) extreme. The pure power of the story, and its intense Kafka-like paranoia, mean that it has 'anthology' stamped all over it.

THE SCANNER, Kevin Lyons, Flat 4, Kingsmere, Coronation Road, Cowes, Isle of Wight, PO31 7JZ. #3: A4, 20pp, £0:95; #4: A4, 24pp, £1:20. This lively magazine is just starting to find its feet now, with issue #4 featuring a new image of glossy cover and more pages. The fiction can tend to vary in quality, but issue #4, on the theme of Dystopian Futures, sports good contributions by Adrian Hodges and John Light, with D.F. Lewis and Philip Backers in support. Something does need to be done about improving the quality of the illustrations, and perhaps making them more relevant to the items they accompany.

The strength of *The Scanner* lies in its critical items, with the controversial "Science Fiction We Can Do Without", which this issue takes an irreverent swipe at Orwell's *1984*, complemented by the "SF Classics" column, whilst Clyde looks at the "Risk of Reification" in sf literature. Perhaps too much critique and not enough fiction to balance this issue evenly, but it's good to see people willing to express an opinion rather than accept what the media barons tell them.

WORKS, Dave Hughes and Andy Stewart, 12 Blakestones Road, Slaithwaite, Huddersfield HD7 5UQ. #3: A5, 52pp, £1:25, 4/£4:50. Pumping out copies with frightening regularity, Dave and Andy continue to show they mean business with this new issue. All the prose writers in this issue are new to the magazine, though obviously not new to the reading public. Laura Jacobsen starts the ball rolling with an urban paranoia story that owes much to Kafka's *The Trial;* Matthew Dickens contributes a charming and humorous tale of space-borne high-society pomposity-deflation in "The Star-Painters"; and David Alexander's "Rain Dancer" is short, to the point, and most refreshing. Part one of Andy Eastwood's "The Crime of John Stroud", starting

BBR is currently negotiating with *Space & Time* and *New Pathways* to make copies readily available to UK readers of *BBR*, without the hassle of obtaining dollars to send abroad.

To get an idea of the numbers involved, we would be grateful if readers interested in this service would write and tell us which of the two magazines they want, or if there are any other publications featured on these pages which they want to see included in the scheme.

If you enclose a stamped addressed envelope, we will contact you when the magazines you want become available. The latest details will also be published in the *BBR* catalogue.

Please send your comments and requests to Chris Reed, at the editorial address.

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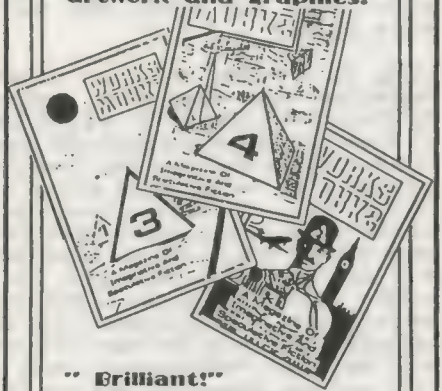

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off like Orson Scott Card's "One Thousand Deaths", quickly develops a fast-moving plot and a cliff-hanger to be resolved in part two. On the poetry front, I must admit that the majority went in one ear and out of the other, but standing out by miles was a Steve Sneyd fifty word micro-epic entitled "Nostalgia Cruise from the Core".

Visual

BLAT!, Martin Chatfield, 31 Town Gate, Heptonstall, Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire HX7 7NB. #1: A4, 44pp, £1:50. *Blat!* is a truly amazing volume. It is packed with animated comics – remember drawing little stick men on your exercise book at school? Only this is far more sophisticated and subtle. The story lines mix and merge, both explicitly and implicitly, as you flick through the pages time and time again, first front to back, then back to front and edge to edge. Enjoy the fantasy – I did, and the first 'reading' took over two hours. I went back to it later and found even more that I'd missed on the first run through. Definitely worth checking out.

Market

FACTSHEET FIVE, Mike Gunderloy, 6 Arizona Avenue, Rensselaer, NY 12144-4502 USA. #29: A4, 96pp, $5. Mike Gunderloy's got *Factsheet Five* looking smarter with every issue now, and with five issues per year now it's sure to become a standard reference journal for the small press. It includes over 500 magazine reviews, plus articles, letters, books and music. From straight prose, poetry and indie music to psychological, psychosexual, quasi-religious and neo-political, if there's an American (or non-American) small press magazine published on it then it'll be listed and reviewed here.

THE NEXUS CATALOGUE, Mark & Jill Harrison, Nexus Bookshop, Baker's Street, Valley Road, Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire HX7 7BZ. A4, 64pp, £1:95. The Nexus Bookshop has been recently set up by Mark and Jill, and deals specifically in magazines and books produced by small presses and independent publishers. This catalogue is a sampler of the range of publications stocked in the shop, from books on books and writing to children's books, travel, poetry and science fiction and fantasy. The Nexus *Small Press Review*, due out in the summer, will carry exhaustive listings and reviews of stock

section by section, as well as news of new arrivals in the bookshop. Subscription to *Small Press Review* is £10, less a refund of £1:95 if you have already bought the Nexus catalogue.

Collections

LOVE POEMS by Richard Mason, from Purple Heather / Backstage Productions, 12 Granby Terrace, Leeds LS6 3BB. A5, 36pp, £1:75. The number of poets that I like enough to keep going back to reread their work can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and Rich Mason is one of them. To see him perform, as I have on a number of occasions, is to experience his keen perception of the world, and unerring talent for communication.

Rich always says that "Performing a love poem is like screwing in public" but, in the more intimate one-to-one situation that reading this book creates, he touches chords deep inside, and you know that even in the violent world we live in, love can still exist. Rich is a man who has been around, he's got his ear to the ground and he knows what it's about. Learn from him. I did.

Books

THE AGONIES OF TIME by Ravan Christchild, from Dunscaith Publishing Ltd, 28 West Lodge Avenue, London W3 9SF. ISBN 1-871685-02-8. A5, 114pp perfect bound, £3:50/$7:50. The three connected stories that comprise this novel first appeared in *VORTEX SF Magazine* in 1977. Following the lead of Moorcock's Cornelius stories, the tales are set in a range of parallel worlds in a continuous state of flux and revolution, whilst the heroes and heroines endeavour to save time and history from everlasting corruption.

Unfortunately the narrative, in trying to follow the fragmentary style of the era, tends to lose sight of where it is heading, and lacks even the slightest indication of any underlying masterplan to hold together the various levels and subplots that comprise each story. Rather it rambles on disjointedly with little attempt to hook the reader into wanting to continue to the finish of the story.

According to the press release the book is "firmly rooted in seventies teenage fantasy", but even so the attempts at humour are cheap, often puerile, and largely unsuccessful. Sexual encounters are similarly adolescent in the frequency of their occurrence and clumsiness of handling.

The "swashbuckling romp through alternative histories of the twentieth century, a fantastic tale of love and war" that we are promised, then, is rather a poor and careless imitation of the style and content of the Jerry Cornelius mythos - at one point even cribbing one of its characters - but severely lacking the heritage and masterful handling of Moorcock's creation.

Miscellaneous

PANDEMONIUM, Matthew de Monti, 42 Kings Lane, Little Harrowden, Wellingborough NN9 5BL. #15: A5, 60pp, 75p, 3/£2:00. A cheerful magazine catering for fans of role playing games, and in particular Tunnels & Trolls. Each issue features a scenario and a variety of gaming articles, as well a selection of fiction and a rather smart comic strip by Garen Ewing.

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LETTERS

Seán Feerick, 130 Gregory Crescent, Eltham, London SE9 5RY.

I like the idea of the little 'blogs' around the stories. Please bring back the poetry, these have been some of the most powerful parts of the magazine and it would be shame to lose them.

Good to hear you are starting to publish one writer collections in the near future, hopefully you will keep the combination of words, pictures and graphics in them. I for one will be keeping an eye out for the Simon Clark one in the summer.

Mark F. Samuels, 55 Brasted Close, Peak Hill, Sydenham, London SE26 4LT.

It hardly seems necessary for me to say how much I appreciate the significant improvement in quality and presentation over the past few issues, since so many others seem to have commented on precisely the same two things.

t. Winter-Damon's "Ten Doorways of the Velvet Angel" was a little too strong for my delicate nerves – but it embodies a terrifyingly disturbing sexual violence with all the skill of a decadent poet.

"The Grave-Digger's Tale" by Simon Clark captures my vote for the best story of the issue; I missed its publication in *Fear* and was surprised and pleased to find it in *BBR*. The humour in the tale mingles surprisingly well with the horror aspect, reminding me almost of Ambrose Bierce's work – if he were writing in the latter half of this century, although the 'Rose Burswick Monster' is more like something out of Lovecraft's imagination! The whole charnel atmosphere thing was a masterpiece. A ripping yarn, if ever there was one!

Chris Whitmore, 10a Harcourt Road, Sheffield S10 1DJ.

The Dallas Goffin cover illo scored full marks, and as glossy covers do give me the horn then you'd amassed a veritable plethora of brownie points afore I'd even browsed through the goodies on offer within. General layout was as good as I've come to expect, easy to read and a relatively good crop of artwork, with SMS's perfect solid bewailing its fate on page 3 and Mr Goffin's haunting piece on page 28 firm favourites, whilst I couldn't see any merit in the rather minimalist cruiseliner on page 11 and found D'Israeli's deflating kitten sick rather than funny.

I like the idea of a letters page and the opportunity it provides for reader feedback, though I found myself heartily agreeing with Dave Hughes about the lack of poetry in *BBR*, though not as a means to break up the stories but more simply for its own sake. They say that variety is the spice of life, and in this context I feel the absence of poetry as a balance for prose removes some of that spice.

Full marks to Steve Sneyd for the opening offering, a well put together piece that left me feeling rather sorry for the monster in the cab and simply annoyed at the heroine, though I think I might catch the train back home this weekend just in case.

Don Webb's "Hocus" gave me further pleasure – I liked the idea of a guy whose time has run out, and yet would love to know whether the *History of Ballooning* was accompanied by "Shine on you Crazy Diamond Pt 1". Don't ask me why, Grace Wedderburn managed to thoroughly enchant me, with that young narrative voice and its amazement at how well endowed satyrs are, though the story's conclusion left me sad, as the younger generation proved more interested in acne cures than the regeneration of a race.

"Ten Doorways of the Velvet Angel" was my favourite of the issue. Beautifully crafted though perhaps an overdose of alliteration. Didn't think too much of Simon's story of horror in the graveyard, but that is purely from a dislike of horror stories in general and having overdosed on irradiated mutants during the days of my youth.

Lyle Hopwood, Laguna Hills, California, USA.
(response to Matthew Dickens, Letters, #12)

Bah! Banal it may be; I hadn't really intended "Sensonomicon" as a Major Contribution To Road Safety, but! in a foreign language it isn't. First off, you don't know what Nashnallity I am, and second, what is this British sf anyway? Charles Platt started this at a panel in the Brighton Worldcon, and Square Jawed All American Johniboy Clute backed him up, saying that (and this is what I presume Mazza Dickens means by "yes, Charles," an otherwise inexplicipoo ejaculation) that British sf was downbeat and Marvin-like, but world-wide successful British authors wrote in an American style – the language of their conquerors as Johniboy called it, perhaps thinking of Saxon noblemen speaking crap Norman French and giving us Mutton for sheep meat and Beef for cow. I don't know if this analysis is even generally true but it certainly isn't relevant to cyberpunk which is always quite downbeat like "Sensonomicon", not that "Senso" is bastard well cyberpunk anyway or else.

I was writing about the 2000s, or so, and Pig – who I imagined as a child of mine – grew up watching Transformers, Thundercats and Galaxy Hi; reading Judge Dredd and Swamp Thing; playing the tie-in video games; listening to Poison, Guns'n'Roses and Bon Jovi. In other words steeped in the Culture common to all young Britons, which is why he talk way he do.

Michael Cobley, 18 Athole Gardens, Hillhead, Glasgow G12 9BA.

Just a note to say thanks for *BBR* #12. I liked Dave Transue's illos – they weren't *quite* how I envisaged Rosse (I had this picture of a seedy Harrison Ford/James Dean type) but thought they were very good nevertheless.

Neil K. Henderson, 46 Revoch Drive, Knightswood, Glasgow G13 4SB.

I can honestly say that I enjoyed everything in *BBR* #12, though I am especially drawn to the more surrealist/experimental than the straightforward SF/horror. D.F. Lewis is brilliant. "Em" was wonderfully subtle in its haunting back-to-front innocence (and "Weirdmonger" deserves all the praise it's been getting). Love VanderMeer's humour, and Winter-Damon's chilling dream-reality; these billiard players probably deserve everything they get, anyway. But Top Of The Pops for me was Tom Farbman's "The Speech" which just seemed to hit the right spot for me. Great to see "Lift" in such august company – please thank Mr Brooks for most appropriate illustration – it seems to follow the eye down the page as one reads!

Peter Tennant, 9 Henry Cross Close, Shipdham, Thetford, Norfolk IP25 7LQ.

I had to look over Tom Farbman's "The Speech" once again to check it was as bad as I remember. It was! I saw no point at all to this aimless drivel; a bad case of verbal diarrhoea if ever there was one. Did an advertiser let you down at the last moment so you had to fill the pages with whatever was to hand? I'd try to be constructive but all I can think of to say is "Yuk!"

I feel better having got that off my chest, and "The New Creatures" by Mike Cobley reinforces this feeling. It was a fine example of what a good story should be like. Accessible prose and ideas, but thought provoking and slightly demanding. A plot that rolls along nicely, with plenty of incidents and action. Strong characters with whom we can identify. A bittersweet ending. Mike Cobley's work hasn't always been to my liking, but he seems to have got his act together this time. I look forward to seeing more of his stuff.

Stunning best describes the effect on me of t. Winter-Damon's "Ten Doorways of the Velvet Angel". I'm not surprised to find he is a creative writing instructor. This prose poem had an elegaic quality mingled with the suggestion of brutality and decadence. Beautifully written and strangely moving. I await the promised splatterpunk excerpt with bated breath.

I've little to say about "The Grave-Digger's Tale" by Simon Clark, having already commented on it in an LOC to *Fear*. I'm disappointed that you should publish a story that has already had far wider exposure. I assume there were good reasons for doing so but I hope it won't happen again. On the cover it says "Original Fiction and Art". Let's stick with that idea, okay?

[The background to Simon's story appearing in both magazines at once was that he sent me the story and I accepted it. Then by error he sent it to Fear *as a sample of his work, but they wanted to use it. Thinking that they would take longer than* BBR *to process the story, he gave them permission to* reprint *the story: unfortunately they got their act together faster than we expected and they beat* BBR *by a month or so – Chris]*

I liked most of the fiction in issue #12 and would rate it your strongest line-up yet. There were one or two stories that made me cringe, but then it's unreasonable to expect to enjoy everything in a magazine with *BBR*'s commitment to speculative/experimental fiction (does even the editor enjoy everything? *[Of course – that's why I choose to publish it in the magazine. There's not much point in promoting material I don't believe in, is there ? – Chris]*) so please don't take any critical remarks out of context. Overall I'm very happy with the way the magazine's going and consider it excellent value for money. So, keep up the good work.

M. Pierce, 8 First Avenue, Bath.

The longer stories were on the whole better than the shorter ones. It is with reluctance that I say that I much enjoyed Steve Sneyd's contemporary use of that old fairy-tale motif, wish fulfillment through rape, in "Taken for a Ride". I'm not at all sure though that his amoral (at best) use of this distasteful theme is justified – I hope this isn't a case of writing and publishing a controversial story just to attract controversy. One of us is being cynical, I hope it's me! If it weren't for this serious point, I think this would be my favourite story of the magazine, but instead that most prestigious title goes to Matthew Dickens' excellent "Enthousiasmos".

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